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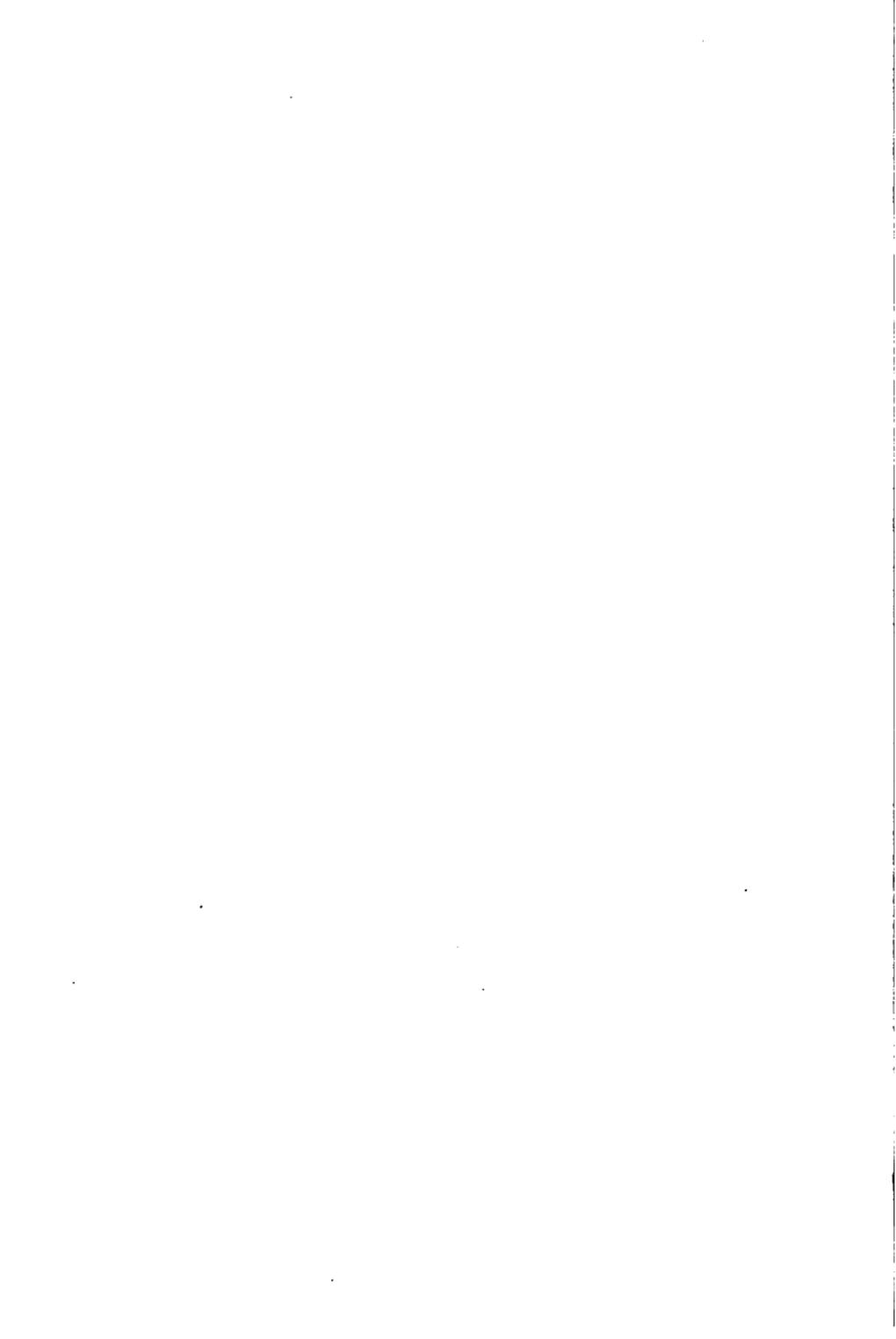
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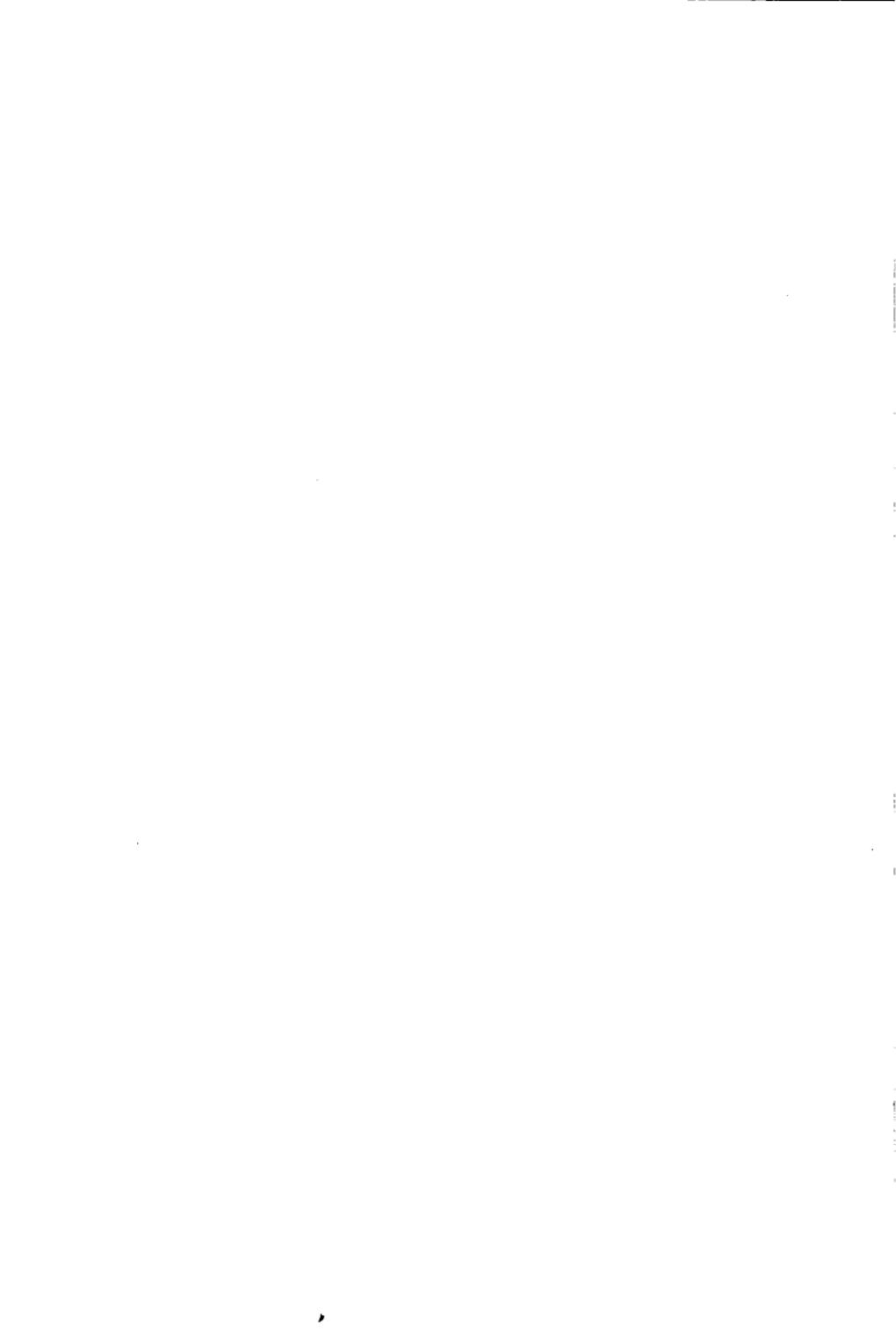


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The Heron Nest

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By

W. Bert Foster

Author of "The Eve of War," "With Washington at Valley Forge," "With Ethan Allen at Ticonderoga," etc.

James E. Martin.



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JAN 25 1910

Published by

THE RURAL PUBLISHING CO.
NEW YORK

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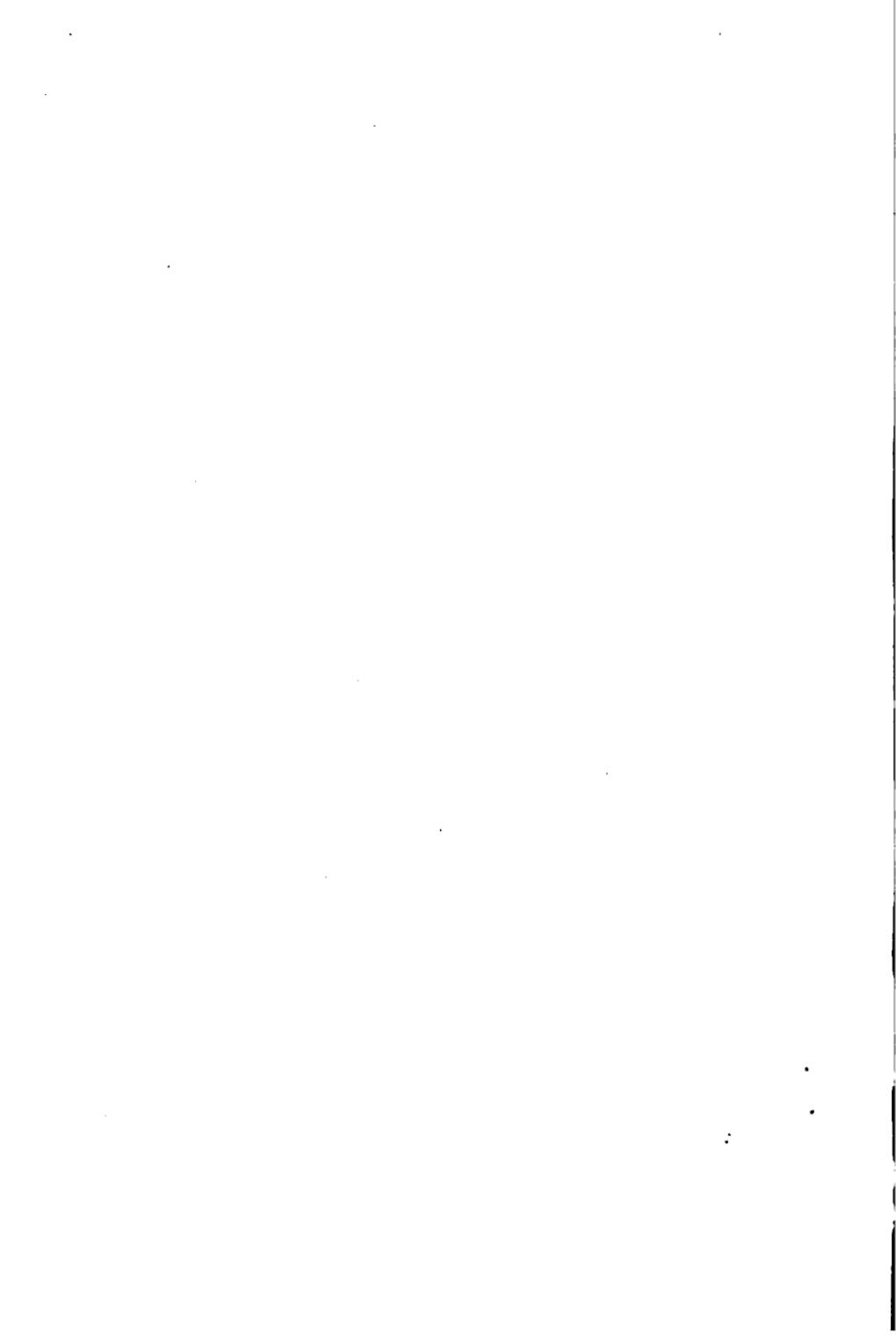
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THE GOOD ANGEL OF BAD LUCK.

CHAPTER I.

"THE END OF ALL THINGS."

As you opened the door your nostrils were assailed by the combined odor of stale soapsuds and many, many boiled dinners. The narrow halls had been steamed over and over again, and the woodwork, the tattered paper on the walls, even the broken plastering itself, was saturated with it.

Although he was quite used to these smells, and to the squalling of the children on the staircase, and the bullying of half-drunken men, and the wrangling of hopeless women, it all struck Billy Herron rather harshly as he came in at dusk. He was obliged to take breath at each landing as he climbed the stairs, and when some monkey of a boy, lying in wait for him at a particularly dark corner, knocked the stick out of his hand and ran whooping and clattering down the flight, Billy had to wait a moment to compose his features before recovering the cane and hobbling on to the right-hand door at the end of the hall, which opened into the Herron kitchen.

He waited there for a moment, too, with his hand on the knob of the door. There was a rule that he, and Jack, and Pearl Mary, seldom failed to observe. They had agreed never to come in at night without a smile, and a cheerful word, or a song on their lips, or a funny story to tell. Jack got his stories out of the paper, and sometimes told the same one twice. Pearl Mary could usually find something to relate about the furshop in which she worked—something which had happened during the day—which was interesting and sprightly. But more than that was expected of Billy.

The hours were gloomy enough at home for the three elders of the family. But Mr. Herron, and Granny, and Aunt Nannie, were really only the elders by courtesy; Jack, Billy, and Pearl Mary shouldered all the responsibility. And these three had

declared that, first of all, they would be cheerful! No long faces allowed. No sighs. No tears. And if food and raiment were hard to get, and they had to pinch and contrive with their infinitesimal income, *they were to pinch and contrive as though it were fun to do it!*

When the crash had come (they all spoke of it in that way, and in whispers) something had happened to Mr. Herron's mind as well as to his fortune. Perhaps his first thought was that the family faced starvation. That impression was uppermost in his weakened mind, and so he began to order home enormous quantities of eatables—enough butcher's meat for a hotel; a bake-cart full of loaves of bread; a dozen barrels of flour and sugar. Of course, the Herrons had no money to pay for these goods, nor any need for such quantities, and the merchants grew angry and threatened to have Mr. Herron arrested for malicious mischief. So he could not be trusted out alone, and was more care for Granny and Aunt Nannie than a child.

Granny was a silver-haired old lady, who had seldom been obliged in all her long life to put her hand to actual house-work; the theory of housekeeping and its practical workings are two very different things. When the servants went and the Herrons had retired to a smaller cottage, and finally (Billy said it was so that they might be nearer to his work and so save car-fare) to this small flat in the cheap tenement-house, Granny and Aunt Nannie engaged in tasks that they had only been obliged to overlook before. And Aunt Nannie turned her skill in needle-work and crocheting to some small account, too.

It was Billy, and Jack, and even Pearl Mary (although she was younger than either of the boys) who shouldered all the responsibilities of their changed conditions. Jack would have remained completely stunned by the shock of the misfortune; he would have drifted with the tide of events and been finally wrecked, had it not been for Billy and Pearl Mary. But Billy's disposition was elastic and his enthusiasm for work and determination to pull the family out of the slough into which it had fallen aided immensely in helping the other two to gain their balance.

Billy's mind was whimsical and inventive; in the past he had read much, filling a naturally retentive mental storehouse with a fund of good things. His cheerfulness was usually spontaneous, and his bright quips and stories flowed in the main as easily and delightfully as they had when home had been far different from this dark, smelly, and noisy tenement. But to-night his burden was heavy upon him as he reluctantly turned the knob of the kitchen door.

"Oh, goody! here's Billy now," Pearl Mary's voice hailed him. "What made you so late to-night, Billy-boy?"

"Why, I'm not much late, am I?" responded Billy, in his most cheerful tone, kissing Granny in her chair by the fire and nodding at his father who sat on the other side of the stove, busy with a toasting-fork and a huge pile of sliced bread.

"Just see the clock," was the girl's retort. "What do you call that, sir?"

"I call it fast—about twenty minutes fast," replied Billy, grinning. "That clock is getting actually dissipated, Sis."

"Well, here's Jack. We can have supper now. Father, you've enough bread toasted for a regiment—and a hungry regiment at that."

Jack was big and handsome—black eyes, olive skin, curly hair that was almost like the "raven's wing," too; and with a fine color in his cheeks. Billy looked puny beside him, and one would never have taken them for brothers, saving in the fact that both were dark, there was a resemblance in the shape of their heads, and their voices were of the same sweet timbre, although Jack's was fast becoming the heavier of the two.

As for Pearl Mary—well, she sometimes declared a quarrel with Nature because she had so little of the "Herron look" about her. Her wonderfully blue eyes and sweet expression of countenance went a long way toward making her pretty; but when she looked in her glass she could trace no resemblance to either Aunt Nannie, or Granny, or to the dear, dear photograph which she treasured, of she who had gone—who had gone so long ago that Pearl Mary could not remember her tenderness and love!

THE HERON NEST.

There was an old "album" of family pictures. Billy referred to it as "The Herron Gallery of Antiques and Horribles." Old-fashioned photographs are, really, queer-looking things unless the pictures conjure in one's mind old loves, and old memories that are as sweet and dear to one as youth itself! But these pictures were merely a gallery of hard-featured, stern-looking men (many in soldier clothes of 'forty-eight and the 'sixties) and of apple-cheeked children and prim-looking women. Ah! the early attempts in the art of photography certainly display Truth without the companionship of her gentle handmaid, Mercy! But they were all Herrons, and Billy and Jack showed undeniably their blood-link with the tribe. Whereas, Pearl Mary could not find a picture in all the collection in which her covetous eye could trace a single feature like her own! "I am an interloper," she sometimes said. "I'm a changeling—an elf-child. Some wicked fairy stole away the baby that was really *me* and left a stranger in the cradle. I am the cuckoo in the starling's nest—"

"Say, rather, the thrush in the heron's nest," chuckled Billy, and that usually closed her little tirades.

Repartee did not thrive to-night, however. It was not a very jolly supper, although Billy tried to keep the ball of conversation rolling briskly. Jack seemed distraught and even forgot at times to eat—a most remarkable circumstance for the big fellow. Pearl Mary sometimes became silent and Billy staggered on alone with the burden of talk, trying to drown by the sound of his voice the insistent clamoring of his own secret trouble.

Aunt Nannie knitted sacks all day for a jobbing house; but now that her eyes were troubling her she went to bed early with pads of soft, cool linen on the inflamed lids. After supper Granny fell gently asleep in her chair by the fire and Mr. Herron retired to his own closet-like room. The boys slept together on a shake-down couch in the living-room. Their cramped quarters was not the least of the trials the young Herrons bore.

When Pearl Mary and Jack had finished the dishes, they came to the table where Billy was doing a seemingly endless calculation upon a slip of paper under the glow of the lamp.

"Won't it come right, Billy-boy?" asked the girl, running her white fingers through the cripple's thick hair, as she leaned upon his shoulder.

"I guess it comes *right*, all right," admitted the boy, with a rueful smile on his thin face. "But I can't seem to make a dollar do the work of two, however hard I try."

Jack cleared his throat suddenly, and Pearl Mary looked up at the big fellow with apprehension in her eyes. "What's the matter, Jack?" she whispered. "What is it?"

"It's the worst possible thing that could happen," said Jack, sullenly, refusing to look at either his brother or herself.

"Oh, Jack! Not—"

Billy looked grave, but he interrupted Pearl Mary's exclamation with:

"The breakdown of your feeble health and loss of your canary-bird appetite would be the 'worst possible thing' that could happen to you, old man! And I declare neither of those calamities are at present apparent."

"You can josh all you like," retorted his brother, his gloomy air still upon him. Then he said, with finality: "I've lost my job."

Pearl Mary cried: "Oh!" But Billy said, before she could utter more than the exclamation:

"And it can't be helped. No use weeping over spilled lacteal fluid, as the cat said when she tipped over her saucer, chasing the rat."

"You don't suppose I lost it on purpose, do you?" demanded Jack, looking at the girl for the first time, now. She drew a little away from him, and her pretty face showed some suspicion—and more trouble.

"Don't be a chump, Jackie. How did it happen?" asked his brother.

Jack had not taken a chair. He stood now, grinding one heel thoughtlessly into the thin drugged that covered the middle of the room, and leaned his clenched fist upon the table. It was a strong, brown hand, with stubbed fingers and the marks of two years' toil in the pattern-shop upon it. The blood flooded slowly

into his neck and face, and he again turned his eyes away from the questioning gaze of his companions.

"Well, I've seen it coming," he grumbled. "Business is slack. And Brannagan had to get rid of somebody at my bench. He pitched on me, that's all."

"That is the Brannagan who used to work for Uncle Calvert?" began Billy, when Pearl Mary interposed, sharply:

"*Mister* Calvert's old foreman, Brannagan, you mean. Don't call that man 'Uncle', Billy."

"Just as you like, my dear," returned the cripple, easily. "He probably isn't any prouder of the relationship than we are."

"But you knew Brannagan disliked you. You—you said he—he 'had it in for you,'" Pearl Mary declared, rather accusingly, and addressing Jack. "You must have given him some provocation."

"I did!" ejaculated Jack, flashing out in sudden anger, and wheeling to look at them again. "I knocked him down!"

"John Herron!" said Pearl Mary, solemnly.

"Whew! that was going some, old fellow," observed Billy, and even he could not hide all his disapproval.

"I—I am ashamed of you!" declared the girl. "You are certainly old enough to appreciate our situation, Jack Herron. You should have restrained that ugly temper of yours—oh, dear! it is *always* getting you into trouble."

"Tut, tut! what about our own, Miss Spitfire?" interposed Billy, putting a restraining hand upon her arm. "Be a man, Sis! never kick a fellow when he's down."

The girl uttered a sob, and turning suddenly, ran from the room. The eyes of the two boys met squarely. The cripple asked:

"What was the trouble, Jack? Was it about——?" he nodded at the door that Pearl Mary had just closed.

"Yes," said his brother, his wrath rising in remembrance. "It was what the brute said made me do it. But he had already made up his mind to discharge me. He told me so. I begged—by heaven, I *did* beg, Billy! Don't you suppose I realize what the stoppage of my pay means to us? I ate enough humble pie to

choke me! And then Brannagan said we were fools because we took on our shoulders a burden that had been assumed when the family had means and money to throw away. You know the kind of talk Uncle Calvert gave us when — when poor father became so bad? He called her a — a work-house brat!" burst out Jack, clenching his fist, and shaking it in the air. "I couldn't stand *that*, Billy — "

"But it isn't true," interposed his brother, softly. "Such a lie couldn't hurt her."

"It would break her heart if it reached her ears," cried Jack. "I wouldn't listen to such talk from *any* man about our Pearl Mary! She could be no sweeter — no dearer — if she was our very own sister — "

Billy raised a warning hand. "Let her remain in ignorance of the truth yet, Jack."

The big fellow suddenly dropped his gaze, and his heel began digging into the suffering drugget again.

"Do you think it wise to hide it from her — always?" he whispered.

Billy looked at his averted face with sudden attention; but at that moment they were interrupted:

"Sh!" whispered the cripple. The door of the bedroom opened and Pearl Mary crept back, dabbling her eyes. While she was crossing the room Billy squared his shoulders and plucked up his courage again. "Well, well, it's done and can't be helped," he said, strongly. "And I don't blame Jack a mite. I'd have done the same had I stood in his place — and had his muscle," and he was actually able to coax a laugh into his voice.

"Come, sis! don't rail at him. Accidents will happen in the best regulated families, as the servant girl said when she poured kerosene into the kitchen fire. . . . But," he added, his face growing suddenly rueful again as he glanced at the figures before him, "I guess I'll have to do this sum all over. I was trying to figure out how we were to get along if Mr. Mendon only has work for me half a day, hereafter."

"Oh, Billy!" cried Pearl Mary, clasping her hands, and now the tears overflowed. Jack stared at the cripple gloomily.

"Mr. Mendon wants the office on Brampton Heights kept open half a day for a while longer, and I'm to be there until I find something better to do. He is going to keep his own books until the real estate business picks up."

Neither Jack or Pearl Mary will ever know what it cost Billy to say this, and to say it without a tremor in his voice.

"Are you really out a job, too?" said Jack, as though unwilling to believe his ears.

"Practically — yes."

"And, oh, boys! boys!" sobbed Pearl Mary. "The fur business isn't brisk after this time of year. I haven't wanted to tell you, but Mr. Love lays off most of the hands in February."

It looked like "the end of all things" had come to them. Billy tore the paper into small bits and rose from the table.

"We won't figure too far ahead," he said, with a watery smile. "Let's sleep on it, away. It's a bad outlook to-night. Maybe the sun will show us something good."

CHAPTER II.

RACK AND RUIN VILLA.

But the sun did not appear the next morning — at least, not to the young Herrons. A thick fog wrapped the city in its chill dank mantle. Billy stubbed away with his cane across town to the little real estate office on the thinly populated plat.

There seemed some promise of Spring in the unseasonable air, despite the brown patches of snow left in the fence-corners and the hub-deep mud in the streets. The branches of the trees were bare and dripping; but Billy saw the coming leaf in each budded twig. The open ground about the little office was almost like the real country; and Billy had always loved the country. The Herrons' own dear home had been upon the border of the town and had included a large plot of ground on which the children had been allowed to exercise their bent for the cultivation of both flowers and vegetables; and Billy, after his big "double-runner" had gone wrong at the bottom of Schutter's Hill one Winter's day, now six years back, and the doctors had patched him up but told him that he would probably always drag that left leg as the convict does his ball and chain,—Billy had spent a great deal of his spare time out of doors and experimenting in the garden.

Had the young Herrons not been obliged to accept the first work that offered after the crash came, they would have tried their fortune in some agricultural community. They had often talked of it. Jack had an itch for farming; Pearl Mary read everything she could get hold of about poultry keeping—including some very entertaining fiction put out by the manufacturers of, and dealers in, poultry supplies!—and Billy himself longed for the out-of-door life to which he had been used. The whole family was stifling in the city tenement. Mr. Herron could have much more freedom, and would be better off in every way, in the country, too; there was no doubt on that point.

And these things Billy had secretly pondered, time and time again; and to what end? Capital was needed if they sought to support themselves on some village farm, and there was never twenty-five dollars between the Herrons and absolute want.

But his troubled thought clung tenaciously on this morning to the dream of getting away from the city and its deadening environment. He did not see how it could be brought about; yet the circumstances of the family spelled "change." He breathed in the damp, soft air through the open window of the office, and lost himself in vague castle-building—an amusement not a little foreign to his real nature. His was too active a mind to be contented with dreams. But to-day he saw the Herron family transplanted from the dark tenement to a pleasant little house, somewhere in the open world—with some trees, perhaps; and a garden at the door; and a barn with a horse and cow, and a chicken-run for Pearl Mary; and a dairy for Granny and flowers for Aunt Nannie. While as for himself and Jack—well, Jack was big enough and strong enough to do a man's work in the open as he did in the shop; and Billy knew that if there was a chance for a boy with a "game leg" anywhere, it was in a garden.

"A family can't starve, at least, if the members are energetic and cultivate a piece of ground of respectable size," thought Billy. "With poultry and a pig one can defy the butcher's bill. How often can we afford green vegetables now? We get most of ours by the aid of a can-opener! If one is really poor, too, the subject of how to dress need not be such a bogey in the country as it is in the city. And leather does not wear out so quickly on country roads as on city pavements!"

"It is our only chance—our only chance; and yet I declare I do not see an opening wedge of clear sky in the prospect! I shall have my afternoons to myself; but should I not spend them looking for another and better paying job, rather than dragging a game leg about the country looking for a place we could get to work and a house we could live in? And Jack will feel the same, too. When his pay ends on Saturday night he ought really to prospect in the machine shops for a job, not in the rural districts. It's a puzzle—a puzzle. . . . Ah! here is Mr. Mendon."

The real estate man had driven over behind his fast pacer, and he leaned from his seat to shout a greeting to the young fellow.

"It's near one o'clock, Billy," he said. "Better call it a day. Hop it with me and I'll take you home—only not directly. I've got to go around by Medway and have a look at that Darnell property. It's likely to be an elephant on my hands, with sales as slow as they are now. The house and stables burned down, and that disgusted Darnell with country life, so I got it cheap enough; but nothing is cheap, Billy, if you can't realize on it within a reasonable time."

He said this while Billy was locking the door and climbing into the runabout. Medway was a ten-mile drive and the Darnell place—"Darnell Villa" it had been christened by its late owner—had lain idle for two years. But Billy Herron's mind was not set upon this piece of property as they drove through the country roads. He had accepted Mr. Mendon's offer of a drive because it seemed to fall providentially in line with his recent secret discussion. He had his eyes open for small places to let—so-called "abandoned farms," which might appear on their line of travel. Mr. Mendon seldom carried country property of any character on his lists.

There were such places; but Darnell Villa was little more promising at first sight than these. A prospective buyer driving past the neglected gateway and lawn, with only the foundation walls of the burned buildings and the rubbish heaps in view, would scarcely have been attracted. This was the thought in Mr. Mendon's mind that had brought him out here so early in the season.

"Nice mess, eh?" grumbled the real estate man. "Until it's cleaned up I wouldn't want to show it to a customer. And whoever will I get around here to do the work? Within a week after the buildings were destroyed every flowering shrub and every small, valuable tree that decorated this lawn (and there were a goodly number of them) were taken up at night and carried away. When the fruit was ripe in the orchard yonder, the trees were skinned clean. You can see that there is nothing

left of the buildings materials but planks and timbers that are half burned; all the good lumber was removed soon after the fire by the same marauders, I suppose."

"It is a shame that a few people in a community should be allowed to give a bad name to the entire population," said Billy.

The real estate man said: "Well, whoever it was, they took away almost everything of value but the cellars. And I wonder they didn't take that toolhouse yonder."

Billy had already had his eye on this. It seemed to be in very good condition. There were stout plank shutters at the windows, the door was intact, and there was a fine cemented cellar beneath it. The building stood on the edge of a steep little terrace and the cellar was open to the rear, having been used as a cart shed by its former owner.

There were other things that began to attract Billy's attention, too; the henhouses had been burned to the ground; but the wire runs were still standing, the marauders evidently having considered the poultry netting not worth the carrying away. The stable cellar was piled with refuse; but the young fellow saw that a good deal of the half-burned lumber was useable, although weather-beaten. The whole place, however, was undeniably an eyesore.

"If it is cleaned up, the driveways and paths kept in shape, the grass cut occasionally through the season, and chains put up at the gateway, it wouldn't look so bad," ruminated Mr. Mendon.

"The masonry of the house and stable should be covered by boards to turn the rain," said Billy. "Whoever buys the place might be exactly suited with the ground plans, at least, of Mr. Darnell's house. The foundations are in good shape yet."

"That's right, Billy. It would give an entirely different air to the place. But who's to do it, and who will watch it after the work is done?"

"And cut the grass, and keep the weeds out of the paths during the Summer?" added Billy, with some slyness in his look.

He had become flushed and his eyes sparkled. But his companion did not notice his excitement.

"As far as that goes," Mr. Mendon said, "there should be somebody on the place all the year around. Just as the orchard was picked clean last Fall, so I believe there has been timber cut up in my woods. I hate to spend money on a place that may not sell for years; and yet, if I don't take better care of it I'll probably *never* sell it."

Billy's voice was shaking a little when he spoke again.

"I say, Mr. Mendon! don't look to-day for anybody to do this work for you and care for the place. Leave it to me for a few days. I shall have plenty of time now to look about, and I believe I can find a satisfactory party for you."

"You can, Billy?"

"I believe so," said the boy, soberly. "Anyway, let it go until Monday, will you, please?"

"Sure, I'd be glad to take anybody that you can thoroughly recommend, Billy," declared his employer, who had a good deal of respect for the crippled boy's judgment and a thorough belief in his honesty.

They rode back to the city almost in silence, for Billy's mind was fully set upon a project that had sprung to life, full-grown, in a moment of time. It was so tremendous a scheme that he scarcely dared broach it to Jack and Pearl Mary. In fact, he could not bring himself to explain the thought at once; but that evening he arranged that, after morning service on Sunday, they should take the electric car to Medway, and from there walk out and view the old Darnell place. Of course, he had to satisfy the curiosity of the others in a way, or he would have been torn to pieces! So he explained that Mr. Mendon was looking for somebody to clean up the place, and if nothing better appeared Jack, with his help, might do it.

"I don't see why *I* should be obliged to go out there, then—and it will cost an extra twenty cents," objected Pearl Mary. "It makes me just *hungry* to see the country, even at this time of the year."

"Come on, Sis! be a sport!" advised Billy, jokingly. "We couldn't very well get along without you, could we, Jackie?"

"I should say not," returned the big fellow, heartily, and with a meaning that only Billy understood.

So they made the trip on their only free day—the Sabbath. Billy had obtained the key of the toolhouse from Mr. Mendon, and when he had briefly explained to Jack what needed to be done, he opened the tight little building and they went in. Darnell had been a wealthy man and everything about the villa was substantially built. This house was not plastered, but it was ceiled with matched yellow pine, the windows were of good size and most of the glass was whole, and there was a double floor. It was a tight, warm, and good-sized cottage, only of but one room.

"A fellow could camp in this very decently while the job was being done," Jack said, with growing enthusiasm.

"And wouldn't it be lovely in Summer!" sighed Pearl Mary. "Oh, Billy! if we could only *all* live somewhere near here."

"In a house like this?" shot in the crippled boy, looking at her askance.

"Oh, well, this is an awful looking place, of course," said Pearl Mary, standing in the doorway and overlooking the rubbish heaps and barren masonry of the burned buildings. "It should be called 'Rack and Ruin Villa,' I think. But in Summer——"

"You know," said Billy, quietly, "there is nothing good in this world that is not paid for first. *Somebody pays!* Every pleasure is at the cost of some pain. And if you want to see the beauties of Rack and Ruin Villa, as you call it, in Summer, it must be at the cost of hard work, some sacrifice, and possibly a vast amount of worriment."

The girl turned on him with a sudden cry, and even Jack started forward, staring at his brother in amazement.

"What do you mean, Billy?" they both demanded, and in unison.

Then Billy told them. Mr. Mendon not only wanted the place cleared up; he wanted it watched and cared for. Who could do that so well as somebody living on the place? Here was a house that could be made habitable—even for six people. Jack had his chest of carpenter's tools. There was some lumber at hand. Billy earnestly declared that he believed the toolhouse could be turned into a three-room cottage in a week.

There was, in addition, a garden, an orchard, small fruits, fuel for the cutting, a run for poultry if no house—many, many things, indeed, that by a little ingenuity and some labor, could be made of practical use for whoever was willing to move upon the place. In fact, Billy's bottled-up enthusiasm ran over in a torrent, and its flood carried Jack and Pearl Mary with him, and swept away any doubts they might have had in a cooler moment. Besides, like Billy, they had spelled out the warning their unfortunate conditions wrote for them. A change had to come. None other than this venture presented itself, and it was something which marched with their secret desires. They were young, and Youth is daring. So—they clasped hands on it, and it was agreed. Billy was to ask Mr. Mendon for the job of caring for Rack and Ruin Villa.

CHAPTER III.

"BONE LABOR."

"What! you, Billy?"

With these words Mr. Mendon greeted the crippled boy's suggestion that the job of cleaning up the Darnell place, and caring for it, be turned over to him. The suggestion of doubt and perplexity in the real estate man's tone, however, did not feaze Billy Herron. He was armed against discouragement by both the desire and determination to win the contract!

He explained how his brother, Jack, was suddenly thrown out of employment. Mr. Mendon already knew that Jack was a big fellow, able to do a man's work any day. Billy was confident that, with the occasional aid of a horse and wagon, he and Jack could remove all the rubbish from the cellars, clean up the lawn and driveways, and put the whole place in such shape that Mr. Mendon would not be ashamed to show it to any prospective buyer.

"But how about the keeping of it in order?" asked the real estate man, thoughtfully.

That brought Billy to the part of the argument that he realized needed his most convincing oratory! He began by frankly putting the situation of himself and his family before his employer. He spurned the idea of accepting charity in any form. He did not want the use of the place if Mr. Mendon did not believe that he would receive in return full value for what he gave.

Jack was a good carpenter, could turn his hand to anything that had to do with tools, or machinery. There was sufficient old lumber on the place to make the proposed shelter for the foundation-walls of the villa and the stable. What chanced to be left they could utilize in running the partitions through the tool-house. After their experience in the crowded, dark little flat, the Herrons would not consider that cottage too small for comfort. Mr. Mendon would be obliged to give the tool-house a coat of paint,

anyway, if he wished to freshen up the whole place, and Billy would put it on if the material was supplied. On the same terms, if the owner would supply a lawn-mower, the Herrons would keep the grass shaved in Summer, and the paths edged and free of weeds.

Oh, Billy talked convincingly! He had never in his life, perhaps, been so much in earnest. His enthusiasm had its weight with Mr. Mendon; but there were other reasons why the real estate man looked favorably upon the project. He had watched the young fellow long enough to have explicit confidence in his word. The contract was drawn that very day—and it was not an illiberal one.

The real estate man was to pay sixty dollars for the first clearing up of the place, the building of the weather-boarding for the bare foundation walls, and for the painting of the tool-house. The Herrons were to occupy the house rent-free, making their own repairs; they were to have the use of as much land as they wished to cultivate, all the fuel they needed, and whatever could be made out of the orchard and the small fruit patch that had become a veritable swamp through neglect, in return for which they were to care for the place.

The contract was "signed, sealed, and delivered" and Billy almost forgot his dragging foot on the way home to Jack with the paper in his pocket. The big fellow's enthusiasm was quite as keen. He did not waste an hour, but overhauled the tool chest and got it ready to be taken the next day in Mr. Mendon's light wagon to the scene of their labors.

Billy drove with him, and in the wagon Mr. Mendon placed shovels, a mattock, a sharp ax, an iron bar, a rake, hoes, and a fork. The use of these tools saved the Herrons at the start a considerable outlay of cash and was a kindness on Mr. Mendon's part. But first of all the boys set to work on the tool-house itself. The crying need was to make it habitable for the family, remove them with their goods and chattels into it, and thus cut off the important expense of rent.

The house had a pitched roof and stood eight feet and a half from the sill to the eaves. Billy had noted in the first place that

a good storage loft was possible by laying a flooring above; and by doing this it would be easier to keep the lower rooms warm, too. But after building the partitions, reserving sufficient of the best planks for the boarding for the top of the villa and stable masonry, there was not enough long planks to lay a loft floor over more than half of the cottage.

This loft was built over the living-room, which occupied nearly half the building. The remainder of the space was divided into two unequal chambers—the smaller for Mr. Herron, the larger for the women-folk. The boys determined to "camp out" upon the finished loft floor, which they reached by aid of a ladder in one corner. Over the two chambers they tacked overlapping sheets of heavy building paper, braced with strips of "shingle-lathing" which had to be purchased new at the sawmill in Medway.

In fact, they found as they went on, that more new material than they expected had to be purchased. The remodeling of the tool-house into a fairly comfortable shelter cost more than ten dollars. They built a chimney of cleaned brick, raked out of the rubbish of the villa, and boarded up the cellar in the rear, putting in one of the small windows from the wreck of the stable, and hanging a tight plank door. Here Jack set up his bench and in stormy weather the room could be used as a workshop.

Within a fortnight the little cottage was ready for its occupants. Mr. Mendon drove out to overlook their labors and was so greatly pleased with the neatness of the job that he sent out the paint for the building at once. But Billy determined to wait until March, at least, before risking outside painting.

The family must be moved at once or pay another month's rent in advance for the flat. Billy went to several "moving men" but learned that there seemed to be a general and decided objection in all their minds to going so far into the country, and at this time of year, for less than ten dollars a van-load. Of course, the Herrons' small possessions would scarcely fill a van; but the price would be the same for a full load, or a half load.

Billy said nothing to the others—especially to Pearl Mary—but swallowed his pride and went to Uncle Calvert. He knew

that his mother's brother had plenty of idle horses and wagons at this time of year. If he could get the loan of a team, Jack could load and unload the furniture, with some small assistance from Mr. Herron, who was not physically incapacitated, and by making two, or three, trips to Rack and Ruin Villa, their possessions might be transported at the time-cost only.

In the old days, "before the crash," the Calverts and the Herrons had not been on really bad terms. Indeed, Billy could remember very clearly, although he was a small boy at the time, that Uncle Calvert had borrowed money of Mr. Herron, and in no inconsiderable sum. The debt had been paid long since, of course; but it had been a friendly loan on Mr. Herron's part, no interest had been charged for the use of the money, and to Billy's mind there must remain an everlasting feeling of gratitude on the part of the now successful Uncle Calvert toward the man who had been his benefactor. Billy was quite as proud as Jack; quite as proud as Pearl Mary. He knew that his brother would not even speak to Uncle Calvert on the street, and that Pearl Mary would not call him "uncle" because of his harsh treatment of the whole family since Mr. Herron had failed in business. The girl, too, had a personal grievance toward Uncle Calvert.

Soon after the crash the man, who was undoubtedly honest but a money-grubber, had offered both Billy and Jack employment; but the wages he agreed to give the boys was at least a third less than they could get elsewhere. He was willing to appear to assist his sister's family, but he could not resist the temptation to exploit the boys to his own aggrandizement! And in addition, Uncle Calvert had included Pearl Mary with Granny, and Aunt Nannie, and Mr. Herron, as a burden upon the boys' shoulders.

"Women-folk are always a set-back to a man," declared Uncle Calvert, in Pearl Mary's hearing; "and this girl is a useless weight on your hands. Let her go out to service. Find somebody who will take her in for the use she can be around the house. That's the best thing you can do for her. Besides, you have no right to assume a burden that your father and mother were foolish enough to shoulder when they had money to throw away."

Pearl Mary had heard this; but she did not understand it. And Billy had stopped Uncle Calvert's mouth instantly, while the angry Jack led the girl out of the room. The remembrance of the occasion had rankled in Pearl Mary's mind for two years.

However, Billy believed that he had no right to allow pride to stand in the way of his obtaining proper assistance for the family—assistance that could not be really classed as charity. Mr. Calvert's horses were eating their heads off in the stalls and needed exercise. He boldly put the proposition to his uncle, of course being obliged to explain the reasons for the change the Herrons had undertaken.

"What's this? what's this?" grunted Uncle Calvert, a bald-headed, fat man who fitted so tightly between the arms of his desk chair that there was always a grave doubt in Billy's mind whether he could ever be got out of it again without bodily injury. "Going into the country—the whole of you? What kind of new folderol is this? You boys are just exactly as bad as your father. Always trying new things, and never satisfied to plug along in the groove that God Almighty placed him. Hem!"

"This seems to be a necessary change, sir," said Billy, respectfully. "Mr. Mendon hasn't work enough to keep me busy all day, and Jack has lost his job entirely——"

"What! Both of you out of work? How did you manage to lose your jobs?" demanded the man, suspiciously.

"It did not require any particular talent to manage it these times, Uncle Calvert," returned Billy, smiling. "Times are hard; business is dull; and we chanced to both be laid off together. Pearl Mary's work will not last much longer, either——"

"Hem! that girl!" exploded Uncle Calvert. "You're determined to be burdened with her, are you?" and he scowled at his nephew.

"Her wages have helped us a great deal," said Billy, soberly. "For a while we shall have to depend upon them entirely for ready money while we are getting established out there at Medway."

"Why, you'll be worse off in the country than you are here in the city!" declared Mr. Calvert.

"I do not think so." He explained the job that Jack and he

had obtained to clean up the Darnell place. "It will give us a footing."

"It will give you nothing of the sort. It will plunge you into debt. You cannot get along in the country; nobody can these days. See the abandoned farms. Why are they abandoned? Because people cannot make their living on them."

"That is a mooted question, sir," said Billy, gently.

"It's no question at all—it's a fact!" declared Mr. Calvert, who seemed to be anxious to make himself angry with his nephew. "I don't approve of your folly. No good will come of it."

"But it seems to be the only thing that offers just now——"

"I offered you both—Jack and you—work and fair wages two years ago. You spurned my offer, sir—spurned it!" ejaculated Uncle Calvert, with increased heat. "See where you are now—thrown out of work, without a penny to your name, and driven to the last resort of removing into the backwoods where no young fellow—even if he has industry and ambition—can expect to get ahead. Hem!" concluded Uncle Calvert, "I wash my hands of you."

"But—won't you let me have a pair of horses and a wagon for—for a day?"

"I wouldn't trust you with a team for an hour. You're too big a fool," returned his relative, and swung around to his desk again and showed him nothing but a broad back and a pair of round shoulders with a fringe of reddish-gray hair at the top.

Billy knew better than to plead. He was well enough acquainted with his Uncle's nature to know that the man had worked himself up to this pitch of anger merely that he might have an excuse for refusing his nephew's request. Billy walked quietly out of the office. But if he walked quietly, and did not slam the door, or show any emotion in his thin, pale face, there was feeling enough boiling within the cripple's soul.

He stood a moment and looked back at the place, and at the bowed figure of his uncle at his desk. Then he whispered:

"I'll never come here again! No matter what happens to us, no matter how we suffer, or how low we fall, I'll never attempt to obtain a favor from that man again. I'll never cross his

threshold," and then Billy Herron brought himself up short, and added a condition which saved his determination and his own character: "I'll never cross his threshold, *saving to do him a good turn!*"

So the Herrons paid ten dollars of their hard-earned money to a van owner and the furniture was transferred to the remodeled tool-house at Darnell Villa in one day. Jack had already begun fulfilling the contract with Mr. Mendon, and Billy and the elders settled the furniture and made the home as cozy as was possible.

The fortnight had been one of hard, "bone labor" for both Billy and Jack. The latter was well able to perform the work; but with Billy it was different. The convict with his ball and chain is worn to a sallow shadow; the cripple's dragging limb had an equal effect upon his mind and body. Billy was ambitious and wished to do more—a great deal more—than his strength allowed. He lay down at night so tired in every bone and muscle that he could not sleep; he arose in the morning unrefreshed and in such agony of body that he could scarcely move without groaning.

And to be cheerful with it all—to smile, and chat happily, and crack his usual number of jokes, and continually to grease the wheels of the family's daily grind, was a gigantic task—a task under which, during the first month, Billy Herron was often near the point of sinking!

CHAPTER IV.

GETTING INTO HARNESS.

It had been agreed that Pearl Mary should hold her situation in the fur-shop as long as she could, and she went back and forth to her work on the trolley each day.

This long walk, night and morning, made it very hard for the girl who was unused to exercising the muscles brought into play by walking; she grew thin and panted in mounting the rising ground between the edge of the village and Rack and Ruin Villa. She would not give up; it was only for a few weeks at best, she told herself. The family needed her wages so, for moving had taken every penny they had and they faced the new life with nothing but courage! The three elders of the family made no complaint; Mr. Herron was as bidable as a child, Granny was always cheerful even when the rheumatism gripped her, and Aunt Nanny was gently grateful that they were enabled to escape the horrors of tenement life. She continued her work for the jobbing house, although fast as her fingers might fly, her weekly income never amounted to three dollars. Hope was big in the hearts of the boys, however. There was the sum of sixty dollars in sight, and that was *sure*. Mr. Mendon would even advance them a part of it if they were in need. Their hands were busy, as well as their brains, and both Billy and Jack were inclined to live in the present and not fatten any anxiety for the future.

"Crossing bridges before they're in sight is a most unhappy habit," Billy said, warningly, more than once. "The ant in the old story, of course, is to be commended for her foresight and caution; but there's something to be said on the side of Mr. Grasshopper, too. At least, he added to the gaiety and sweetness of the world while the Summer lasted; and some of these serious, trouble-expecting folk, really darken the sunshine about them."

"Make up your mind to do your little old best," pursued this cheerful philosopher, "and give a good and merciful Omnipotence a chance to help you over the hard places when you come to them. At any rate, foreseeing trouble without being able to ward it off is a gift that I don't crave. If misfortune is bound to happen I don't want to know it much in advance; it disturbs my digestion."

And Billy Herron practised his own preachers. As his unaccustomed muscles grew hardened to the tasks he made them at first by sheer will-power perform, his ability to see the best side of everything that happened became more pronounced, too. His enthusiasm did much to carry the whole family over the shock of the change and the first few weeks of their new existence.

Jack and he were busy from the first streak of morning light until long after dark. And they found in Mr. Herron an unexpected, but welcome, aid when they really set to work to clear the foundations of the burned house and stable. He was to be trusted out of doors here; he could come to no harm and he was at once much happier in his increased freedom. Although his mental powers were debilitated, his physical powers were vigorous, and Billy saw that labor of the hands would be the very best habit his father could form. They set him to work on the more simple tasks of clearing up. He could use a shovel and could throw the rubbish out of the cellars. He could help Jack lift and tug at the heavier timbers; and after some trouble they even taught him to clean brick. Mr. Mendon had given them permission to make what use they could of the abandoned building materials after the boarding for the foundation walls was built, and the boys hoped to make a little by the sale of the best of the brick. There had been an ornate chimney at either end of the Darnell residence, and, after the fire, these had fallen into the cellar. Several thousand of the brick were quite as good for ordinary building purposes when cleaned, as when fresh from the kiln. Mr. Herron proved so helpful that Jack urged his brother to leave the cleaning of the cellars to himself and his father, while **Billy gave his attention to other and lighter tasks.**

The boys came very soon to the point in the cleaning up process where the use of a horse and wagon was necessary. Jack suggested going into the village, where there was a large stable at which teams were to be hired, engage a wagon and horse for the day, and do all they could within the time-limit to remove the useless rubbish which had already been thrown out of the cellars.

But, as it chanced, they obtained the help they needed without the expenditure of time or money. Billy had painted a neat sign reading: "Good Brick For Sale," and had nailed it to a post and set the post by the gateway. The farmer whose land joined the Darnell place on the west was a very long man named Short—'Lias Short, according to the speech of the neighborhood. He frequently drove past the Darnell place behind a tough looking, shaggy Canadian pony, sitting doubled up like a jackknife on the seat with his knees almost touching his long chin, but with a pair of very sharp, twinkling eyes, that never failed to overlook the doings about the Darnell Villa, with marked curiosity.

When Billy put out his sign it gave Mr. Short an immediate excuse for stopping when next he came along.

"Hello, young feller!" was the way in which he hailed Billy, who chanced to be the one in sight. "Air them bricks any good at all?"

"They're just as good as though you bought them at the brickyard—and a whole lot cheaper," declared Billy. "Come in and look at them."

Mr. Short did so. Mr. Herron had piled the cleaned brick very neatly and many of them did not even show marks of the fire. The farmer's weather-beaten countenance expressed nothing, but his eyes narrowed and Billy knew that he scented a bargain.

"I gotter fix up my smoke-house before next hog-killing time," he observed. "I 'low I might make use of some of these old bricks, if you're lettin' 'em go cheap enough. You know, money's scurce this time of year——"

"They won't cost you a penny, Mr. Short," declared the crippled youth, promptly. "How many can you use?"

"Eh?" ejaculated the farmer, his eyes opening wider in surprise. And he eagerly stated the number he wanted.

"All right. You can have 'em! You're not using your team much this time of year, I suppose?"

"The hosses air sartainly eatin' their heads off," declared Mr. Short.

"You'll draw the brick yourself, then. And in payment," said Billy, calmly, "you can draw away three loads of this debris for every load of good brick you take. Is it a bargain?"

"Why—why—I dunno," stammered Short, whose speech as well as his body did not fit his name. "Where'll I dump the stuff?"

"Suit yourself about that, as long as it's off this place," returned Billy, briskly.

"There's a low piece in the road betwixt your place and Sowersby's," drawled the farmer. "What d'ye say to spreadin' it there? I'll see the road surveyor and make it all right."

Billy agreed. He was only too glad to get rid of the refuse from the cellars without the expenditure of a penny. And as Mr. Short considered that *he* had the best of the bargain, it was all very pleasant. The farmer displayed a good deal of curiosity regarding the Herrons and their affairs and it was not so easy to shut off his investigations in certain directions. But Billy was good-natured about it, seeing plainly that the man's interest was friendly.

"You don't tell me you're going to stay here and run this farm?" Mr. Short said, in surprise. "Why, you're city folks, ain't you?"

"Yes, we are. And we've got a lot to learn, Mr. Short," said Billy, frankly. "But we're only going to cultivate as much of the land as we can easily handle while we are caring for the whole farm for the owner."

"So you got charge of the whole fifty acres, eh?" queried Short, reflectively. "Air you keepin' yer eye on the timber up yonder, too?" and he indicated the heavily wooded mountain-side which shielded the cultivated portion of the Darnell place from the north.

"We're supposed to look out for Mr. Mendon's entire property here," declared Billy, firmly. "While the place has lain idle, I understand that there has been some trespassing; but I hope we shall have no trouble of that kind, Mr. Short."

"No? Wall, I hope not," replied the farmer, somewhat grimly. "I guess, though, you've got your work cut out for ye, take it all 'round. . . . Wal, I'll come for the first load of bricks to-morrow."

Before Pearl Mary's work at the fur-shop ceased the bulk of the clearing up around the place was accomplished, and when Jack had completed the boardings to shelter the stone foundations of the burned house and stable, it did not look so much like "rake and ruin." During the long evenings the three young folk laid their plans for the Spring work. Although the heavier part of the labor must of necessity fall on Jack, it was Billy's intelligence that arranged the campaign.

The fifty-acre farm lay upon the mountain-side ("mountain" by courtesy), and was rather a narrow strip of land with a good frontage on the Medway road and a narrower one on the old Northfield pike behind the higher ridge of the mountain. The farm was naturally terraced. Some distance above the site of the burned mansion a broad creek, crossed the widest part of the farm, and there was some good pasture on either side of this stream.

Not more than ten acres of the place had ever been cultivated. Mr. Darnell had had a good garden the two seasons that he and his family had lived here, and that garden-patch, although grown to weeds, was in very good condition. The level piece on which the foundations of the mansion still stood, and which bordered the road, contained about four acres. Here was the garden, the berry patch, and the young fruit trees. An old and long-neglected apple orchard occupied a portion of the second terrace.

But at first Billy would not allow his own eyes—or those of Jack and Pearl Mary—to be cast beyond that four-acre piece. "We mustn't bite off more than we can chew," he said, with more philosophy than elegance. "We can use only the land that we

can properly enrich and spade over, and then cultivate. That's the most important item—cultivation, thorough and frequent. The man who sows more seed than he can keep the weeds out of, wastes at both ends of the game. And although spading is far better for the land than even sub-soiling, it is back-breaking toil and will have to fall to the share of Jack almost altogether. We cannot afford to hire the garden plowed and harrowed. We must do everything by hand and, by methods of intensive farming, get a bumper crop off of every square foot of soil."

Billy was an omnivorous reader, and had always been interested in gardening. He had been born with that love of seeing, and helping, things to grow and devoutly believed, with the great Dean Swift, " * * * that whoever could make two ears of corn, or two blades of grass to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country, than the whole race of politicians put together."

For years the crippled youth had collected the informing little booklets issued by seed-houses, and his knowledge of theoretical farming was not inconsiderable. It is what one learns in childhood that is really learned well, and Billy had spent many hours at work in his own little garden, and under the tutelage of the old gardener that Mr. Herron had been in the habit of hiring each season when the family was in good circumstances.

The decision of greatest importance, Billy declared, was the choice of the crop to be raised. He had his own idea regarding this point, and was determined to try a crop which farmers throughout the North have not, in the past, seemed fully to appreciate. But he deferred the discussion of this with Jack and Pearl Mary, until later.

Meanwhile the latter toiled daily at the fur-shop in the city; but the toiling home at night after the day's work was done was infinitely more tiring for the delicate girl. Often the car she boarded was filled with workers as tired as herself; she had no right to expect some man who had paid for his seat and secured it, to give it up to her. The conditions under which shop people labor at the present day is fast stamping out all courtesy and is

breeding a selfish race. So Pearl Mary often had to stand the greater part of the distance from the city to Medway, and when she left the car was scarcely able to drag one foot after the other. She tried her best to hide her weariness from the family; especially from Jack, who was prompt to meet her each evening before she got out of sight of the scattered lights of the village. There was a penetrating drizzle of rain one night, and the roadway was dark, and every step splashed the slush and mud over her ankles. It seemed, as she slowly climbed out of the village, that her aching feet slipped back faster than she could advance them. She saw Jack's figure looming up ahead at last with a relief too great for repression.

"Oh, Jackie-boy!" she cried. "If you hadn't come soon I would have fallen right down here in the road and died."

She clung to his arm, sobbing with sheer weariness. The big fellow's voice was husky when he replied.

"This has got to stop, Mary. I've been telling Billy so. I suppose I'm thick-headed, but I can see as far into a millstone as the next one, I guess. And I believe that what you make in that confounded fur-shop won't pay your doctor's bill if you continue. You've got to stop it! I won't have it! We'll have you sick on our hands, and then what will become of the family, eh?"

"Then you don't believe with Mr. Calvert that I'm a burden, too?" said Pearl Mary, with a laugh that was likewise a sob.

Jack growled something very uncomplimentary to Uncle Calvert and slipped his arm around her to aid her steps. His strong arm supported her all the way up the hill, and when they reached the low place in the road that Mr. Short had been trying to fill with rubbish, he picked her up bodily and carried her over the swamp.

"Oh, Jackie! how strong you are," she murmured, settling herself in his arms with a contented little sigh.

He held her closer and did not set her down when the swampy place was crossed. Her head on his shoulder, with the fair hair glistening with a aureole of rain-drops, her deeply blue eyes half shaded by the weary lids—her whole slight, relaxed form in his arms, suddenly inspired in the young fellow an emotion so thrill-

ing, so sweet, that it almost overpowered him! His own eyes became blurred; his step faltered.

"I'm too heavy, Jackie; put me down," she whispered.

But he refused, marching on in silence until he deposited her on their own doorstone. There she did not leave the shelter of his arms until she had kissed him.

The Herrons were a quietly affectionate family, but they were not given to indiscriminate caresses. The boys had long since abandoned kissing Pearl Mary, and she was chary of either giving or accepting such favors. Jack opened the door, and, still in silence, guided her into the warm and glowing kitchen; but when the door closed again, Jack was shut upon the outside of it. Billy came out to him by and by, and found his brother standing in the rain, his hat off and his face with strange emotion in it. The cripple seized his arm and shook him a little.

"What's the matter, Jack? What are you mooning here for? Supper is all ready and Pearl Mary is asking why you don't come in."

Then Jack looked at him, and his voice shook: "Billy! Billy! we must tell her. It isn't right. She's near seventeen, Billy; she is a child no longer. This—this mustn't go on——"

"Sh!" Billy put a quick palm upon his brother's lips and dragged him out of sight as the door slowly opened and Pearl Mary peered forth. "You mean——?" And then the crippled brother, looking close into Jack's face, read the answer to his half-uttered query. "You mean that *you* are no longer a child, Jack! . . . I—I did not think of that," sighed Billy.

CHAPTER V.

THE PLEBEIAN ONION.

They could no longer postpone the discussion of their main crop and Billy "orated" on it: "There are several things that could be grown to advantage on this patch, but some are harder to raise than others; some are subject to more diseases than others; and the market for some is often over-supplied," declared Billy. "But there is one article of human diet of which there never seems to be a surplus."

"What's that?" demanded Jack.

"The plebeian onion."

"Goodness me, Billy!" ejaculated Pearl Mary, making a little face. "You don't mean that we shall grow onions, do you? They smell so!"

The boys laughed uproariously at this, and Billy said:

"They don't smell *so*, growing, Sis. And they can be cooked so as not to be unpleasantly odoriferous, too. Besides, the market is never over-supplied. Thousands of bushels come in from the South, and from Bermuda, the year 'round."

Jack, who was watching Pearl Mary's face, burst into laughter again. "There's nothing romantic in raising onions, Mary thinks," he said.

"But there'll be a lot of hard work," observed Billy, firmly. "The weeding and transplanting must be done by hand; but although it is tedious work, it is comparatively light. That's where *I* come in; I can do most of the cultivating myself, and that will leave Jack's hands free for heavier work. For that reason alone I believe the onion the wiser crop for us to try. Besides, this soil is more than ordinarily fertile, it has been worked several years, although lying idle for the past two seasons, and onions grow better on old spoil. On some old farms in New England onions have been planted on the same identical patch for three

generations in succession; and the older the land, the better the crop seems to be. The bogey of crop rotation doesn't have to be considered in the onion business. This soil is naturally moist and more than ordinarily fertile—two very necessary attributes if a good onion crop is to be secured. . . . Therefore, I nominate onions," said Billy.

"Second the motion," declared Jack, promptly.

"A minority vote carries no weight in *this* convention, that is easy to see," said Pearl Mary, pouting. "I only hope I'll be able to plant a border of heliotrope around your old onion patch to sweeten the atmosphere!"

"There is another thing in favor of the succulent, if scorned, onion," chuckled Billy. "After about three months we can expect some return for our work. They do not really mature in less than five months—nearer six; but at three months they can be pulled and bunched as 'scallions,' or 'rareripes,' as they are called in some localities. Pulling them young thins out the rows, gives the remainder a better chance to develop, and bunched onions are seldom worth less than fifteen cents a dozen to the middleman. Under favorable conditions an acre of good ground like ours can be made to produce from four to six hundred bushels of onions. Then, if we get them early, we can bunch scallions from about the first of July right through the season. If we could afford to buy onion-sets we could get the scallions much earlier; but we'll raise our own sets for next year. This year we must be content to buy good seed."

And this seed buying was a matter of momentous decision. Cheap seeds are never cheap at any price, and saving perhaps cauliflower seed, there is nothing so hard to get as clean, fertile onion seed, true to name and sure to produce an abundance of fair sized fruit instead of a lot of "buttons." Billy selected strains of white, red and yellow—the latter of the "Prizetaker" variety, which, when started in a seed-bed and transplanted, will, under favorable conditions, grow to mammoth size, although they lack the finer flavor of the white, or silver-skin variety, or the pungency of the red onion.

Some of the precious sixty dollars which Mr. Mendon paid them went for the seed that had to be purchased early, before the seedsmen's supplies ran out. Every wise farmer should make his list of seeds for the year as early as the first of January, and so get the pick of the supply. Billy had to purchase a few good garden tools, for the shovels and hoes lent them by Mr. Mendon were not all the young gardeners needed. Even a good workman cannot do his best work with poor tools. Billy coveted greatly a modern "wheel-hoe" for the easier cultivation of the proposed onion patch; but he could not afford the luxury this first season. Nor could he think of purchasing a planter with which to mark the drills and drop the seed. But the urgent need which he saw for these tools spurred his inventive ingenuity; and in the end his milling over the problem bore fruit, as we shall see.

The need of counting every penny, in inventing "make-shifts" to save money as well as time, certainly kept the brains of both boys from rusting. Pearl Mary declared that Billy even dreamed at night of raising onions; however that might be, he certainly dreamed of a hotbed in which they might germinate some of the seed of the yellow varieties (as well as other vegetables for their kitchen garden) transplanting them into the open when danger of frost was past. Transplanting is the method of the great onion growers of the South, and beside the fact that a larger onion can be grown in that way, the grower is sure of a full stand.

On the first of February Billy had planted some tomato seeds in a shallow box and placed the box in the south window of the little cottage. But he wanted more space for onions. From the rubbish in the cellars of the burned villa and stable they had saved several unbroken window-sash. Of course, there were not many whole lights of glass in these sash; but by purchasing some new glass and patching some of the broken panes with putty, and by nailing two sash together with strips along their edges, the boys mustered enough glass to cover a hotbed 12x6 feet.

There were enough half-burned floor-planks from the stable to wall up the sides of the hotbed, and the rear wall of the same ruined building sheltered the bed from the north and east. It got

the sun all day in this situation and Jack and his father dug the pit in a few hours.

For this bed Billy knew they should have at least two tons of green stable manure with plenty of straw in it. At first he did not see how they could get it without paying money outright; and there seemed but one place where it was to be had—at the livery stable in the village. Mr. Mendon had kindly recommended the Herrons to the business men of the place, and the stableman knew who Billy was. At this time of year it was somewhat difficult to get rid of the stable cleanings, for the farmers were getting busy at home and the roads were heavy.

"I want the manure," Billy admitted, "but I can't pay money for it, and I have no means of drawing it. Can't I do something for you?"

"You kept books for Mr. Mendon?"

"Yes, sir."

"My brother keeps my books," said the stableman, who was likewise a grain dealer and did a considerable business; "but he's gone South for his health and I've got the books in an awful muss. Straighten them out against the time Bob comes back, and I'll give you all the stable sweepings you want to draw, and when my heavy team isn't busy your brother can cart it up to your place. Is it a bargain?"

It was. Billy spent a solid fortnight straightening out those books; but Jack not only got enough manure for the hotbed, but several loads which they piled for later use. The green manure was allowed to lie for a few days until it began to ferment, and then was turned over and pitched into the hotbed pit, being spread and tramped down until it was about 24 inches deep.

Meanwhile, during a moderate spell of weather, when the frost had come out of the top soil, Jack had turned over and stored in the cellar of the renovated toolhouse a goodly heap of fine loam. This was now fairly dried out and they sifted it through an ordinary ash-sifter, as they had no proper riddle, picking out all the pebbles and roots which came to light. With this prepared soil they covered the manure in the hotbed to the depth of six or seven inches, and then put on the sash and left the bed for several days to heat up.

If was the fifteenth of February when they put in the first seed. They planted some more tomato seed, Spring cabbage, salad, and beet seed for transplanting later; but the bulk of the space was given up to the onions. A couple of old bedquilts served to cover the hotbed at night, or in stormy weather, and Jack watched it, and ventilated it, and covered and uncovered it at the proper times, expending as much care on it, Pearl Mary said, as one would on a baby! He obeyed the first rule for the management of the hotbed; he never allowed it to lack moisture; yet too much water may rot the seed in the ground. The cabbage appeared first and in ten or twelve days from sowing the onions broke ground; the tomato plants appeared last, and those in Billy's box in the house were already a couple of inches in height.

The hotbed was well started by March first, and, as has been said, Jack and his father had fully completed the cleaning up of Rack and Ruin Villa. On that evening when Jack had carried her home Pearl Mary's work had ended. The boys vetoed her further sacrifice, although the family had been "eating up" her wages from week to week, and they had nothing but the insignificant sum that Aunt Nannie earned; and only \$45 remained of the money Mr. Mendon had paid them. Billy Herron faced the problem of how to make this meagre sum supply the necessities of six people, from the first of March until such time as their present work might bear some fruit.

"It's like being cast away on a desert island," declared Pearl Mary, whose imagination was almost as vivid as Billy's own. "Do you remember to what straits the Swiss Robinsons were put in their adventures? And there were those remarkably ingenious men whom Jules Verne cast away on "The Mysterious Island." Just think, boys! if we were only blessed with the kind of brains that the heroes of story-books always have."

"Huh!" grumbled Jack. "And they're always finding treasure in story-books, or some rich man comes along and gives 'em a lift."

"And we've got only practicalities to deal with, eh?" observed Billy, with a sigh. "I fancy it would be easier to figure it out if we didn't have any money at all—or, at least, any *use* for money.

Those adventurers wouldn't have been benefitted by all the gold reserve of the Bank of England. But we're so near to civilization that we've just *got* to have money to live at all. We can't go gunning in the forest for our food; there's no game there, and neither of us would know how to use a gun if we had it. And I doubt if there are many fish to be caught in that brook that flows through the upper part of the farm."

Jack considered that this situation was "up to him." It was not Billy's duty to do everything, so he said. "Look at me! I'm strong as a bull," declared the big fellow, with warmth. "Father and you can get along here just now, Billy. If there's a job in this county, I'm going to have it!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE SOWERSBYS.

Jack knew it was useless to look in Mr. Short's direction for work. And as far as he had observed, only one farmer in the neighborhood seemed to be busy at this time. There had been a heavy fall of snow lately; the road was well packed with it, and it lay deep in the woods and were drifted across the open fields. But frequently Jack and Billy heard the ring of axes on the mountainside to the east of Rack and Ruin Villa, and several times had seen heavily loaded wood sleds trundling down a winding path from the timber belt to the Medway road. So the young fellow set out in this direction on his first quest for work. He reached the by-path which he knew was a right-of-way through the neighbor's land, and followed it toward the thick timber. This man seemed to have cut in the past about all the good timber on the lower slope of his farm; there was nothing standing here but clumps of saplings, or old trees past their prime which would not be accepted at the mill.

"Maybe this Mr. Sowersby will hire another hand for a few days," was Jack's thought. "I may not be able to swing an ax skilfully enough to suit him; but I believe I can keep up my end on a cross-cut saw with that red-headed, long-shanks of a son of his," for Jack had seen the Sowersbys in the village and had not been very pleasantly impressed by their appearance. But a fellow can't be too particular when he is choosing an employer these hard times!

Included in the job the Herrons had done for Mr. Mendon was the repairing of the fences around the cultivated portion of the farm. This eastern boundary of the Darnell place, near which the woodpath Jack was following ran, was well defined at first. But farther up the hillside, especially after he crossed the creek on several huge stepping-stones, the young fellow found

that the fences had fallen entirely in some places, and the stakes and riders seemed to have been removed. There were other old fences—ancient boundaries—crossing the Darnell and Sowersby line, and extending into both farms, which added to the puzzle. Long before he came in sight of the spot where the farmer and his son were chopping, Jack had lost all idea of the location of the line between teh two farms.

It was in a cove, or hollow, in the mountainside that the Sowersbys were at work. Jack saw that the gentle slopes were more than half denuded of the better timber; many of the logs were piled ready to be rolled upon the sled and carted away. Although there were only the farmer and his son at work they seemed to be masters of woodcraft and were systematically stripping the cove of every valuable stick which it contained.

Jack, on entering at the lower end of this hollow did not fail to notice what a lovely sweep of land it would be when once cleared of the stumps and small growth which now marred the prospect. At this lower end the ground was springy and a stream bubbled forth, wandering down the hillside to join the creek below. The conditions in evidence suggested that the side-hills were moist and that the heading of he open spring was probably far up the shoulder of the mountain and could be tapped very easily. The soil was black, loamy, and looked very rich.

The appearance of Jack seemed to affect the Sowersbys rather strangely at first. The red-headed youth saw him coming, and he flung down his ax and started toward the intruder belligerently, demanding:

"Hey! what do you want snooping around here? We don't allow no trespassing on this land. Git out!"

Jack flushed at the follow's attitude and words, and had he thought only of himself, instead of the family's need, would have replied in kind, and there might have been a game of fisticuffs then and there. The red-headed youth's advantage of age and height did not awe Jack a mite! But the elder Sowersby broke in, motioning vigorously to his son to remain quiet.

"Why, I shouldn't wonder if this was one of them Herrons that's come onto the Darnell place. Wachu want, sonny?"

The son continued to display an unfriendly mein, but Jack paid little attention to him. "I came up to see if you were hiring any help," said young Herron to Mr. Sowersby. "We've got Mr. Mendon's work pretty well done, and I'll have some free time before the frost gets out of the ground."

"You goin' to stay on that place and farm it?" demanded Mr. Sowersby, eyeing Jack in rather a puzzling way.

"We're going to use some of the land and look after the fruit—and the property in general."

The red-headed Sowersby snorted. "We don't want no help up here," he declared.

"I dunno, Bub," said the old man, soothingly, his eyes twinkling under their grizzled brows. "I reckon this snow ain't goin' to 'linger longer, Lucy,' an' we got a right smart lot of sleddin' to do yet. He looks like a husky boy."

His son seemed to be smitten suddenly with a form of idiocy that Jack could not understand. He doubled up like a jackknife, smote his knees with both mitten palms, and the blood rose so furiously in his face that the big, yellow freckles spotting it were thrown into distinct relief, and looked as though they could be picked off. But this paroxysm of laughter was silent. His father eyed this behavior with some disgust, and he turned to Jack and asked:

"What'll you work for?"

"What will you give?" retorted Jack. "I'll have to tell you that I've never swung an ax much."

"But you an' Bub can saw against each other, heh?" said the farmer, shrewdly. "Humph! I'll give ye seventy-five cents a day—and we knock off at ha'f past four o'clock. Is it a bargain?"

Jack agreed, and flung off his coat at once. He had no trouble in doing his share of the work, but young Sowersby did not seem at all pleased with his assistance. That bothered Jack but little, however; he went home at noon with a lighter heart. "Four-fifty 'per' won't buy us automobiles; but it will go a long way towards filling our plates at table," he said to the family between mouthfuls.

After that first day, he carried his luncheon, and from eight o'clock until dark he worked like a Trojan. Young Sowersby continued to glower at him; but old Sowersby chuckled and rubbed his hands. He said he loved to see a young fellow work like Jack. There was a short-cut across the farm, which Jack soon learned in going to work. After leaving the once cultivated fields of the Darnell place he mounted into the rocky pastures and crossed the broad and noisy stream which seemed never completely ice-bound. Jack had broken ground with the neighbors on the east side of Rack and Ruin Villa; it was Pearl Mary who first made the acquaintance of Mrs. Short, who was as stout as her husband was thin, and who never failed to hail the girl when she passed on the road. Now that she had the time, she kept a promise made to Mrs. Short, and went over one afternoon to "set a spell." She chanced to arrive, seemingly at a most inopportune moment. Nobody answered her knock at the cottage door, but the hens were shattering the crisp air with wild and abandoned squawkings, so Pearl Mary hurried around to the rear.

As she reached the scene a single, long-drawn squawk signalled the fact that the offending hen was captured. Mrs. Short, with a very red face and very short of breath, stood panting aside, while her long-legged husband backed out of the coop carrying a struggling Plymouth Rock, minus some tail-feathers and all her wits. "That pesky critter!" ejaculated Mrs. Short, puffingly. "I never did—see the beat of her, I—declare! How-do, Miss Herron! Nice day—aint it? Whew!"

"What's the matter with Biddy?" asked Mary, interested.

"Never see such—a critter!" repeated Mrs. Short, while her husband stood by holding the hen under his arm and grinning broadly on their visitor. "She's jest detarmined to set. 'Lias has tried to break her up twice a'ready; but she goes right back on the nest and flights all the other hens off that want to lay. I've a mind to have 'Lias wring her neck, so I have!"

"But why don't you let her set?" demanded the girl, in surprise. "Haven't you any eggs to put under her?"

"My goodness me! I don't want to take care of March chickens. I aint got time to slop around after them," declared

Mrs. Short. "And they're always dying of cold, or wet, or something."

"But I understand that it is the early chicken that pays the best?"

"They're too much care," was the decided reply. "No! she can't set—Unless *you* want her to start your hen farm, Miss Herron?" and the old lady chuckled comfortably.

"I wish I had her long enough to hatch a setting of eggs," said Mary, slowly.

"My! would you fuss with March chickens?" cried Mrs. Short. "Then, you can have her 'till she gets over her fever. 'Lias will shut her up in a barrel and your brother can come over for her to-night. Where are you going to get the eggs to put under her? Our eggs is mongrel—aint neither which nor t'other; and you say you want to raise a good breed."

"I'm going to town right now to get the eggs," declared Pearl Mary, greatly excited. "I will come another day to visit you, Mrs. Short. This is important!"

She ran home and breathlessly explained to Billy the Great Opportunity. "I know it seems just awful to spend two dollars right now for fifteen eggs; but I'll help Aunt Nannie crochet her baby-sacks to make it up——"

"Huh!" interrupted Billy. "Isn't the money we've got as much yours an anybody's? And I believe in the hen business, too; only I've got several things to say about it by and by that may surprise you. You can't begin to learn too quickly to manage the 'hen that lays the golden egg'—for the goose of the old fairy story has gone out of business!"

His sister paid little attention at the moment to this homily, but hurried away to town, and came back at night with fifteen darkly tinted eggs in a nest of cotton-wool. "Gracious!" murmured Jack. "Thirteen and a third cents each for eggs is pretty steep."

"It would be for an omelet," retorted Billy, wisely; "but these are guaranteed sixty per cent. fertile, and we hope that the chicks hatched from them will be the basis of a business that even *you*, Jackie, shall respect in time."

"Oh, I'm not knocking," his brother hastened to say. "Only—do you think it pays to buy fancy-bred eggs for hatching?"

"Nobody can be too well bred—not even a chicken," retorted Billy, grinning. "Mary wants to start right. She *has* started right, I believe. Now, let Mother Short's hen do *her* part."

The cellar under the remodeled toolhouse where the Herrons lived so "compactly" could be entered only by the door outside. There was no opening between the living rooms, and the cemented pit, so Pearl Mary set her first hen down there, making a nest of chopped straw with a little slaked lime sprinkled through it. The industrious and obstinate biddy, who had been such a trial to Mother Short, settled down upon the eggs with a satisfied "song," and the three young folk stole out of the cellar and left her to begin her three weeks' labor. The boys had not as yet found time to build the henhouse they had promised Mary, for Jack was working every day for Mr. Sowersby; but Billy at once made preparation for the expected chicks by building what he laughingly named "The Herron patent brooder and chicken run."

First of all, he built a hollow square of boards, eight feet by six, and eighteen inches high, using two by two-inch scantling for corner posts. In one end he cut a doorway a foot high and ten inches broad, with a drop slide for a door. He covered the top of this run with inch mesh wire, leaving at one corner farthest from the doorway a space where the wire netting was tacked to a frame of laths (a "right angle-triangle") instead of to the top of the boarding itself. This corner could be lifted for water and food to be put in to the chicks, and an ordinary hook and eye held it shut. So much for the run, which, as Billy pointed out, could be moved to a new spot each day if so desired, and would supply exercising ground for twenty-five chickens until they were three months old.

"Of course," Billy said, "the ideal way to raise chickens is on a floor. Keep them off the ground for the first three months, and there is little likelihood of grave disorders in the flock, for in the ground dwells the gape-worm and the germs of other diseases. But, saving in very wet weather, there is not so much

danger of the gapes, and by moving this run to a fresh piece of sod every day or two, I think we can escape any epidemic of disease. You see, it will be impossible for the chicks to stray from this run, and no vermin—neither weasel, skunk, nor rat—can get at them. Now for the brooder."

Billy found a good-sized soapbox about ten inches high, with both a top and a bottom to it. He cut a door to match the door in the run, in one end, and made a drop-slide for that, too. "With a door to both the brooder and run we can move them separately," he explained. Before nailing on the bottom of this box he had Pearl Mary cut a number of strips of flannel and heavy cloth (old petticoats and the like) about ten inches wide, and with her scissors slit these strips to within an inch of one edge, thus making a coarse fringe. These strips Billy tacked upon the under side of the roof of the brooder, allowing the fringes to hang down with only an inch between them, and when the bottom of the box was nailed on, these fringes all but touched the floor.

"You see," explained Billy, "the chicks will run in among these dangling strips and be hovered pretty near as well as by the mother hen. A little sulphur and slaked lime thrown into the brooder and shaken about every day or two will keep out the vermin, and after warm weather sets in the brooder will not be necessary, anyway. By that time I will have ready for you a larger and more airy box with a movable lattice of roosts two or three inches from the floor, on which the chicks can learn to roost, and which will keep them from crowding on top of each other at night for warmth. We do not want any crooked-tailed cockerels or broken breasted pullets in our flock."

In a day or two Mr. Short lounged over to say that "Mother" had another cluck-hen that was fussing around, and asked Pearl Mary if she wanted "the pesky critter." Like a good many other farmers of the old school, Mr. Short looked upon poultry as a necessary evil around the farm. He seldom paid any attention to the feathered stock himself, saving to clean out the houses semi-occasionally, and knock together a few lath coops for the chicks in the Spring. He had allowed his stock to in-

breed year after year until, as Mrs. Short declared, they were mostly mongrels and runts.

Pearl Mary was eager enough to accept the kind neighbor's offer, but she looked questioningly at Billy. She realized that almost every day the little hoard in father's old wallet, tucked behind the clock on the living-room shelf, was melting, and to invest another two dollars in eggs seemed wicked.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," said the cripple, cheerfully. "Some misfortune might attend the hatching of your first setting. Better have a second coming on, too—sort of a reserve fund of chicks, Sis. There is nothing more wasteful than false economy. The chicken business is just as legitimate an investment as my cherished onions. We're going into both ventures for all there is in them!"

CHAPTER VII.

"THE GREAT CONSPIRACY."

Pearl Mary's visit to town for the setting of eggs brought her into unexpected contact, at a street corner, with Veronica Calvert. Veronica was Uncle Calvert's daughter, rather a haughty miss, who had been backward at school, but very forward in aping the manners of her elders.

"Oh, dear me! Is that you, Mary Herron?" she cried, in her affected little voice, offering Pearl Mary a "high hand-shake," which the latter laughingly accepted, for she was amused by the foolish girl's airs.

"Whoever would have expected to see you again?" went on Veronica. "Where are you living? what are you doing now?"

"Just at this moment I am carrying a setting of eggs, Vinnie," said Pearl Mary. "Have a care not to jog my elbow."

"Oh, have the Herrons really gone into the country to live? Too bad, isn't it? And are you living there, too?" cried Veronica.

"Of course; why shouldn't I?" demanded the other, with some sharpness.

"Oh! Why, yes, it isn't surprising, I suppose. You've lived with them so long," said Veronica, in some confusion.

Pearl Mary broke into gay laughter at that. "It *has* become a habit, I suppose, my living at home," she said. "We *are* poor, Vinnie; but we have not had to break up our home yet, and I hope we never will."

"Why—er—yes," drawled the other girl, not at all liking that Pearl Mary should have laughed at *her*. "Of course, if you look on it as *your* home, too——"

"Why shouldn't I?". And Pearl Mary's blue eyes began to flash. "And I do not understand why you should appear surprised that I live with Granny and Aunt Nannie, and my brothers and father."

"Oh, of course! If you consider yourself really one of the family," said Veronica Calvert, sneeringly.

Pearl Mary's voice left her suddenly. Her face paled and her eyes blazed until Veronica was frightened and drew away from her.

"What do you mean by that, Cousin Veronica?" she demanded, at last, but speaking no longer excitedly. She had controlled herself with desperate effort; but Veronica did not understand. She thought her victim's courage suddenly quenched.

"You understand well enough what I mean," said Veronica, haughtily. "And I would just as lieve you did not call me 'cousin.' We are no longer children, you understand, and it is not in good taste for one to claim relationship where there *really* is none."

"What—do—you—mean?" whispered Pearl Mary. She tried to misunderstand the other girl's cruelty. There had rushed into her mind a ray of illumination that cleared her mental vision—that revealed to her a possible truth of which she had never dreamed before! Many little happenings, unimportant of themselves—many words dropped here and there by thoughtless tongues—many facts that she had discovered herself, but been too blind and unsuspicious to understand, all stood before her now in complete revelation. Yet she would not believe!

"What do you try to tell me, Vinnie Calvert?" she cried, at last. "That I am not your cousin? I am no prouder of the relationship than you are, it is true. But do you dare tell me that I am not a Herron? That my mother was not *your* mother's sister? That Billy and Jack are not my brothers——"

"That's just what I mean!" returned the cruel girl. "You are a nobody. You are a foundling. Nobody knows anything about you. You were just left by some tramp on the Herrons' stoop—just as anybody might drop a puppy, or a kitten! Oh, I heard mother and father talking it over long ago. Aunt Mary was just a fool over you, and so was Uncle Herron. . . . Oh!"

The girl fell back another step, terrified by what she had done. And she might well be frightened, for Pearl Mary's mind and

heart were in turmoil. Her brain felt confused, yet some things were clear enough to her—too clear! The words Uncle Calvert had said on that memorable occasion when he had told the boys she was an added burden on their shoulders; she understood his meaning now. The fact that she could never find a bit of resemblance between herself and any other member of the Herron family; that was explained. Many remarks, and looks from visitors at the house which she had scarcely noted when she was small; she recalled them and their meaning was revealed to her.

Almost involuntarily she had bent her steps in a certain direction after leaving Veronica so abruptly. There was somebody who knew—knew all the truth, of course; Pearl Mary determined that he must tell her—and this person was Uncle Calvert himself!

She walked into his office her face of a waxy pallor, but with a brilliantly red spot in either cheek—a mask that she wore when she was excited and which sometimes alarmed Billy not a little. Uncle Calvert merely grunted when he saw her; but he was immensely surprised.

"I want you to tell me something," she said to him directly, and standing beside his desk, for he did not ask her to sit down. "And I want the truth, sir!"

"Is this the way to ask a favor?" he growled. "You're demanding it."

"I'm not asking a favor," said the girl, her lips moving stiffly "I want you to tell me the cruelist thing you could possibly think of! I—I believe I would rather die than hear it; but I must know the truth."

Uncle Calvert's florid face began to pale, and his eyes grew round as he gazed up at her. He feared that the child had gone suddenly insane.

"Wha—what do you mean?" he gasped.

"I want to know if it is true that I was abandoned by my real parents and that—that Mr. and Mrs. Herron took me in—that they adopted me and that I never belonged to them—not really? That I have no right to call Mr. Herron my father—or Billy and Jack my brothers——?"

She broke down here and began to sob. Really, Mr. Calvert was not intentionally a cruel man, but he was irritable, and the girl's strange appearance and her first words, had frightened him. Now he was vexed because he had so misunderstood her when she came in.

"Well, well! have you just learned that?" he snarled. "Of course it's so. Your name is no more Mary Herron than—than *mine* is."

"It is all, *all* true, then?" she whispered brokenly, her face hidden in her hands.

"Of course, it's true! Don't I tell you so? You're not a Herron. Nobody knows *who* you are—unless it's Jim Herron himself, and he's too adleperated, I reckon, to tell, *now*. . . . I knew trouble would come of such foolishness some day; I warned Mary and Jim at the time. Every family has enough to do to get along without taking in charity children. And you weren't even from a home; you was just left at their door, and they were foolish enough not to hand you over to the police."

Pearl Mary was listening; now she raised her head and wiped away her tears. "Please say nothing against them—against Mr. Herron and his dear, dead wife!" she begged, and for the moment the man was smitten with remorse, and flushed under her look. "I am obliged to you," said Pearl Mary, drawing down her veil and moving toward the door. "I know you have told me the truth. *You* would not disguise anything so cruel from me, I am sure."

And when she had gone the man sat there for some time, not at all made comfortable by her comment. Somehow those gently spoken words, and their meaning, stung him as no angry tirade or scornful speech could have stung. For once Uncle Calvert got a glimpse of his own mean soul—and it wasn't a pleasant sight.

The girl went home—back to Rack and Ruin Villa. Dusk was falling fast, and she found Billy awkwardly covering the hotbed for the night, for the air grew keener at twilight.

"Hello, Sis," was the lame boy's cheerful words. "Did you get the eggs?" She set down the basket without replying. "Jack will go over to Mother Short's for the hen after he comes home." Then he suddenly caught the expression on her counte-

nance. He hobbled forward and seized her by the shoulders, perhaps a little roughly in his anxiety. "What is the matter, dear? What is it?" he cried.

She looked straight into his dark eyes, and somehow he suspected that she knew, even before she spoke. Perhaps it was because he had so long feared the time when she *must* know, and because of his recent discussion with Jack of the necessity of telling her. He recoiled a step and his eye could no longer meet her own—as though he were guilty, or had been party to a shameful thing.

"Billy," she whispered, firmly, "you must tell me all. I want it from your lips—I can stand it from you better than from anybody else. What—*who am I?* Tell me! tell me, Billy, all about this dreadful thing!"

She clung tightly to him and hid her face against his breast. Billy put his arms about her and held her closely there for a long minute, ere he spoke. But his voice was firm, too, when he began.

"You are my dear, dear sister," said Billy. "No tie of blood could make you any dearer to us all than you are, Pearl Mary. Indeed, you *are* a 'pearl' Mother said you were a 'pearl of great price,' for she had longed so for a daughter, and there were only us boys. Father wanted you as much as mother, and he immediately named you Mary in her honor, and he would not hear of your being taken from us—No, no!" cried Billy, his voice finally breaking as he recalled that time so long ago, and which the girl could not remember.

"So father called you Mary, and mother called you Pearl, and 'Pearl Mary' you became, and Pearl Mary you have been to us all, *and Pearl Mary you shall be to the end, please God!*"

"But—but, Billy," she whispered, "who am I? Who do I really belong to?"

"To us!" he cried again, holding her tightly. "I do not know who your parents were, if you mean *that*. I do not know that father ever knew, himself. I was too small to remember such details and Granny and Aunt Nannie did not live with us then, so *they* do not know. Father and mother never referred to the fact that you were not blood sister to us boys. Only when

mother went, she took you in her arms and looked at us all as we stood about her bed. '*My Pearl Mary*,' she whispered, and we knew what she meant—even Jack, little as he was, can remember it.

"And so we all felt. You were ours—nobody can, or shall, take you from us until you want to go yourself, and of your own free will. You have been a blessing to the Herrons every moment you have been in the family, Sis, and you were much too little when you came to remember any other home, or any other folk. Father never seemed to fear that anybody would lay claim to you, so I fancy you need not fret on that score."

"You are Pearl Mary Herron, and we couldn't get along in the family without you. Why, Sis, you know that," he added, playfully shaking her by the shoulders. "You have helped as much as Jack and I to keep the family together. We ned you just as much now, and right here, as ever we did! Don't get any foolish notions in your head that you haven't as much *right* in the heron-nest as any of us, even if you are not of the same feathered breed."

"But, oh, Billy!" she murmured at last. "It seems as though I had lost you—lost you all!"

"You haven't!" he cried, vigorously. "We won't have it! You've lost nothing and we've lost nothing. And the less said about all this the better. Come, Sis, I'll make a bargain with you. Don't let us make the whole family miserable because of this unfortunate discovery that you have made. Of course, Jack must know. He has already thought that we were not doing right in hiding the truth from you any longer. Old Jack comes out quite sensible, once in a while, you know," added Billy, chuckling.

"And what is the bargain, Billy?" she asked him, wiping her eyes again.

"Let's not tell the family—Granny, and Aunt Nannie, and father, I mean. Let us form a Great Conspiracy. It is right along the line of our old agreement, Sis, that you have done so much to maintain—our attempt to keep everything unpleasant from their knowledge; or, at least, to put the best face on every happening. What do you say? Will you become a conspirator—with Jack and I—in this?"

"Yes, dear Billy!" she agreed, putting her arms about his neck again. "You are the mainstay—the good angel, Billy, of this family! You have made me feel so differently—so much happier! Yes, it is happiness, because I realize that—even if I am *not* a Herron—you all love me as though I were one.

"You see it right now, dear," said Billy, with a sigh of satisfaction. He stooped and she raised her lips to meet his, and they clung together for a moment in a pure and loving caress. Then there sounded a heavy step on the path and Jack came into sight, returning from his day's work on the mountainside.

"Not now!" she whispered in Billy's ear. "I could not talk about it with Jack tonight," and she whisked away and ran into the house before the big fellow could speak.

But Jack was silent when he joined Billy. The latter's face showed his recent emotion, and he said, shakily:

"Well, old fellow, the truth is out. *She knows.*"

Jack seemed to have much difficulty in speaking, but finally he said, huskily:

"You—you told her all about it, Billy?"

"All any of us know. And we've agreed to keep quiet about it with the folks. It must remain a secret between you, and me, and Pearl Mary. She has agreed to it—the dear girl!"

Jack continued to stare at him, and finally blurted out: "And haven't you anything else to tell me, Billy?"

Billy did not notice his brother's hardly controlled emotion. He shook his head slowly and smiled; but his eyes were not on Jack's face.

"No, Jack. There's nothing more to say," and Billy followed Pearl Mary toward the house. His brother sat down upon the end of a timber when he was gone and bowed his head in his hands. All he could see there in the dark was the picture he had caught, all in a moment, of Pearl Mary held close in Billy's arms.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SNARE OF THE FOWLER.

Certainly Granny and Aunt Nannie did not suspect that Pearl Mary knew. The girl could display her affection for them, and for Mr. Herron, quite as usual. If she treated Jack and Billy just a little differently than ever before, the older folk did not notice the change. And with Jack she *was* different; their attitude toward each other was no longer that of brother and sister, and would have caused remark by any observant visitor.

With Billy it was another story. She was confidential with him; everybody who came to know the cripple, quickly assumed an attitude of trust toward him. As Jack said, "Billy was a fellow to *tie* to."

Even 'Lias Short showed much appreciation of Billy's character and evidently liked his society, although he expressed the opinion that Billy took infinite pains with small matters that *he* had never considered important in gardening—"and he had farmed it for thutty-five year!"

One day, while watching Billy at work, Mr. Short remarked:

"Your brother's woodin' up yonder with Sowersby, I hear tell?"

"He's been helping Mr. Sowersby for a few days—yes."

"Gettin' out a good deal of timber, ain't they?" ventured Short.

"I believe they are."

"Funny. Last year I reckoned Sowersby had cut every last stick theyd take at the mill. He's been cleanin' his place of timber for sev'ral seasons. A mistake, I think."

Something in the man's tone caught Billy's keen attention. He looked up at him from his kneeling position beside the bed and asked:

"How came you to be so mistaken, Mr. Short? Jack says Mr. Sowersby has cut a lot of timber this winter."

"Hem! None of my business, of course," said Short. "Mebbe your brother an' he air goin' whacks on it, heh?"

Short eyed Billy obliquely as though his question had been merely a "feeler." Billy was surprised and stood up to look at his neighbor fairly. "Going whacks on what?" he demanded.

"Why—I heard suthin' about it in the village. Not that it's any of my business."

"You might make it your business to say what you mean, Mr. Short," said Billy, with some asperity.

"Why—they do say—if there's any timber bein' cut over the line—on this here Darnell place, you know—that your brother and Sowersby's going whacks on it."

"And this is what people in the village are saying about us?" cried the crippled boy, in a husky voice. "They say that we are stealing timber from Mr. Mendon?"

"Sho now! mebbe they don't say just *that*. But they dunno how old Sowersby can find so much good timber on his farm. I haven't been up there myself—"

"Do you know where the line runs? Jack told me that the fence was down."

"Why—I couldn't *swear* to the line 'twixt you an' Sowersby," drawled Short.

Billy began to breathe more freely again. Perhaps this was only unkind gossip. But he determined to find out for himself and right after dinner he started up the mountain for the scene of the woodchopping. He knew the general direction of the cove, and he had Jack's footprints to follow. He had not even seen the creek which flowed through the farm before; but he easily found the steppingstones and made his way safely across. Soon the resounding blows of Mr. Sowersby's ax betrayed the direction of the woodsmen's labors, and before long Billy came in sight of them. Jack sighted him at the same instant, and, fearing that something had happened at home, he dropped his end of the saw and ran toward his crippled brother.

"There, dad!" Jack heard young Sowersby exclaim. "Here's another of 'em. What did I tell you?"

"What's up, Billy?" demanded Jack, calling to his brother, who waited for him, panting from his unwonted exertions.

Billy beckoned him close, and, when Jack could hear him whisper, he related to the big fellow what Short had said. "It's not so," declared Jack warmly. "Mr. Sowersby says all this cove belongs to him. If it doesn't, how would he *dare* hire me to help him?"

Just then Sowersby strode up with a scowl on his face. "What's the matter, Herron?" he demanded. "I ain't paying you for loafing, you understand."

Jack turned on him with warmth. "There seems to be a story circulating in the village to the effect that this timber you are cutting belongs to Mr. Mendon—that you cut all your own timber last Winter. Now, you must disprove that—"

"What if I don't?" growled Sowersby.

"Then we'll have Mr. Mendon up here to look at the patch," said Billy.

"You will, heh?" cried the farmer. "And what d'ye think he'll say to *you*? If we've made a mistake and cut a few trees over the line—and I declare I don't know where the line is—it ain't so great a sin, is it? . . . And you've got your share. I've paid you ev'ry day, ain't I?"

"Yes," admitted Jack.

"Then I don't see but you're as deep in the mud as I be in the mire," and Sowersby grinned. "I've got a witness here. Bub'll stand by me. We were cuttin' on our own land when you come up here and got us to help you cut this timber. I s'posed Mr. Mendon let you cut it."

"That's a contemptible lie and you know it!" cried Jack furiously; but Billy clung to his arm and drew him away.

"Don't say another word, Jack," the cripple advised. "And as for you, Mr. Sowersby, you and your son pick up your tools and get off this land. I am sure it is a part of the Darnell farm, and you've known it all along. If you don't go, I'll send Jack for a constable and a warrant. And leave the logs that are cut. Not another stick of timber shall you take from here without you prove your right to it."

"Ah, what did I tell ye, dad?" snarled the younger Sowersby.
"Come on home."

Jack was glowering with rage as the Sowersbys moved off, but Billy was much shaken. "This is a bad business, Jack," the cripple said. "I don't know what Mr. Mendon will say. We're trusted to take care of the place and I believe that that man has stolen many dollars' worth of timber." He looked around slowly at the cove. "You folks have certainly let daylight in upon quite a piece of land; and it has a southern slope, too."

"It's the prettiest part of the farm, I think," replied Jack, but gloomily.

"Splendid soil, too. Leaf mold. Get these stumps out and clear out the rest of the brush, and this sheltered slope would certainly raise fine vegetables," said Billy, with growing enthusiasm.

"Too far from the house," grunted his brother. "Come on, Billy; let's get home."

But Billy went slowly and he gazed about him thoughtfully as long as they were in the scoop-shaped hollow where the timber had been felled.

Jack was in an uneasy frame of mind, and finally he exclaimed: "Billy! do you think we've got to tell Mendon about this? The harm is done now. The timber's been stolen and our telling him won't put the trees back. If he ever gets up so far as this part of the farm he won't know but the trees were cut before we came here."

Billy looked startled at first; then his eyes began to twinkle. "I've often heard it said that bad company corrupts good manners; and it's so... You didn't work with the Sowersbys long, but you must have caught that idea from them. It doesn't sound like Jack Herron."

"Aw—you— And that seventy-five cents a day came in so handy!" groaned Jack.

Billy might have laughed; but it was really tragic. Jack hadn't the pluck to try for another job in the neighborhood. It seemed to him that every person around Medway must have heard about the timber stealing and believed, as Mr. Short ex-

pressed it, that Jack and Sowersby had "gone whacks" in the business. Billy made an immediate trip to town to see Mr. Mendon regarding the timber stolen by Sowersby with Jack's innocent connivance. The real estate man soon appeared at Rack and Ruin Villa. Jack was sensitive and he hated to have Mr. Mendon know how gullible he had been in his transactions with Sowersby; but he had to go up into the woods with the owner, for Billy could not walk rapidly enough. The real estate man looked grave when he saw the havoc wrought in that pleasant glade on the mountainside. Every valuable tree in the patch of woodland had been felled.

"This entire hollow is on the Darnell place," he said, bruskly; "and Sowersby must have known it. But I don't blame you so much, young man, for the boundary marks have long since been effaced. Sowersby has stolen a couple of hundred dollars' worth of timber, perhaps; but I know the man. He'd fight the case in court, and drag you into it. And I don't care to go to law; I'll stand the loss first. But I'll fence the whole farm so that nothing like this can happen again."

Really, out of the affair, good came for the Herrons. Mr. Mendon engaged Jack to cut the posts needed in stringing the wire fence he proposed erecting. "There will be five or six hundred posts to get out," he said, "and I'll give you five cents apiece for cutting and stacking them. You can cut them in your spare time during the summer and fall, for I shall be satisfied to get the new fence up before the snow flies."

Jack gladly accepted this contract, for their father was proving of so much help that the big brother felt sure he could find time to cut the posts. Mr. Herron was willing to do anything that his sons showed him how to do, and he was not unskillful at most manual labor. Indeed, when they had a dry, clear week early in March, he did most of the painting of the little cottage, and Rack and Ruin Villa blossomed forth in a way to utterly belie its name.

CHAPTER IX.

AT WORK IN EARNEST.

But now the snow was fast melting and an occasional wind brought the frost out of the ground; so there was plenty to do in preparation for the garden. In the cellar of the burned stables was a heap of well-rotted manure, and this, with the few loads left from that secured from the hotbed, was all the fertilizer, saving a barrel of lime, that the Herrons had. Billy slaked the lime and as Jack wheeled out the stable scrapings and spread it on the land the lime was mixed with it. Lime is good for all heavy soils; it cures the "sour" in the land, lightens it, and likewise discourages insects and cut-worms.

They had measured the dimensions of the plot they wished to cultivate and Billy drew a plan of it on a large sheet of cardboard. One end was to be devoted to vegetables for their own consumption—a few early potatoes, dwarf peas, beets, snap-beans, turnips, carrots, and a little salad and radish bed. Each bed was defined on this plan, its extent, the distance of the rows apart, and the date when the seed should be planted.

Of course the larger part of their cultivated patch was to be devoted to onions. They could not afford a seeder and marker—not a "boughten" one but it is quite necessary to sow onion seed in straight rows and as thinly as possible. Although good crops are harvested from broadcast sowing, such sowing is of late onions, not early. And Billy knew that this land, having lain fallow for two years, and having been allowed to grow to weeds, would be altogether too foul to risk broadcast sowing. He knew that they would have to fight weeds from the start, and the whole season through.

"Nothing but continual 'knee-drill' is going to keep our onion-bed clean—make up your mind to that, Jackie," he declared.

But Billy's mind now was given to the marking and sowing of the plot when it should be ready. To make the marker was a

simple matter. In a piece of two-by-two joist three feet long he fixed securely an old rake handle. Then to the joist he nailed five pointed strips of lathe about 15 inches long and nine inches apart, like the teeth of a very coarse rake. By stringing a garden line along one edge of the plot to mark the first drill they could line out the entire plot with this marker, four rows at a time.

The making of a planter was a much more difficult matter. They had planned to sow more than an acre to onions; to do it by hand would have been a tedious and most unsatisfactory task, and Billy did not lack wit and invention. He began by nailing two strips across the bottom of a keg that he knocked to pieces, and so made a wooden wheel, boring a hole in the center. He bolted a handle to this wheel, greasing the bolt well so that it would cause no friction where it passed through the hole in the handle, and where it was given plenty of play. He found a large sized shoe-blacking box (it was six inches across), the cover of which fitted snugly. There was a tinsmith in Medway and Billy got the man to let him punch some holes around the sides of both the box and its cover, using a pear-shaped punch, the small end of which was just big enough for an onion seed to drop through. These holes he punched half an inch or so apart, and when the cover was placed on the box, by twisting it the holes could be opened as far as he wanted them, or closed entirely. He tacked the bottom of the tin box on the side of the wheel opposite to that on which the handle was fixed. When placed flat, with the box upward, the seed could be poured in and the cover clapped on. When ready to use, all one had to do was to screw the box cover around until the smaller end of the pear-shaped holes appeared; thereupon the seed began to drop and the person manipulating the planter must walk briskly along the drill, running the wooden wheel to one side of the furrow, so that the seed would drop therein. Simple as it was, and practically costing nothing, the machine worked very well and could be used for other seed beside onion.

The planting was in the future as yet, however. It was real March weather most of the time—windy and raw, with now and then a sharp flurry of rain or snow. But the rising mist in the morning proved conclusively that the frost was coming out of the

ground, and already in the sheltered hollows the bushes were feathered with tender green. Jack swung an ax over his shoulder every morning now and marched up the terraced hillside to a patch of "second growth" where the trees grew close together and sadly needed thinning, if the timber was ever to come to maturity and be of any value at the mill.

Mr. Mendon had advised the thinning of this stand of hemlock, for the trees were just about the right size for fence posts, and Jack found, after he learned to swing the heavy ax skillfully, that he could cut and pile fifty or sixty eight-foot posts a day. It was hard work, even for the big fellow, but at the rate Mr. Mendon had promised to pay him he saw his wages rolling up most cheerfully. Until now Jack's mind was comparatively easy when he was earning money. But the whole family had begun to notice his unnatural quietness and the fact that his laugh seldom rang true as it used. Granny had suggested an unfailing remedy for spring disorders—boneset tea!

Billy wisely decided that the change in Jack was due to the "Great Conspiracy." He saw that his brother was never at ease in Pearl Mary's presence. The big fellow was such an abrupt, open-spoken individual that this attempt to carry matters as usual before their elders, and to betray no suspicion of the secret understanding between the younger trio, Billy believed was wearing on Jack.

On the other hand, Pearl Mary seemed lighter-hearted than ever. If her gaiety struck a false note now and then, Granny or Aunt Nannie did not suspect it. Since the night the girl had come home with her heart and head filled with the discovery she had made through the cruelty and thoughtlessness of Veronica Calvert, the young folk had never spoken of the matter. But often Billy wondered—and in no little trouble of soul—what was passing in the girl's mind in relation to her status in the family. And he could not fail to note that sometimes his brother sat gloomily aside from the family group and watched Pearl Mary with an expression on his face that the cripple was not wise enough to read.

Because there really was no shadow of difference in the atti-

tude of Pearl Mary and himself, Billy was blinded to much of the change in Jack's intercourse with the girl. When Jack's hand touched Pearl Mary's as he was passing her a plate at table, the boy's own hand trembled so that the plate was dropped and broken. They all laughed at his awkwardness and the flush that mounted so suddenly to the very roots of Jack's thick, curling hair even Billy considered only a mark of his natural confusion. It was the big fellow's nature to be reticent; with Billy he had ever been less embarrassed in speaking of his secret feelings than with anybody else; but there was that now in Jack Herron's heart that he could not discuss with his brother! Their mother, dying while Jack was so young, and Mr. Herron's attention being solely on his business—while that business endured—Billy had played confessor to his brother, when Jack had aught to confide in another. These retiring, undemonstrative souls sometimes have a hard time of it in this rude, workaday world of ours. Jack's occasional outbursts and blunt speeches were the expression of actual bashfulness; but few who knew the big fellow would have believed it!

There was no difference, now, in the boys' relations in other matters. Both were eagerly interested in the attempt to establish the family upon a sound financial basis through the development of the opportunities the present conditions gave them. It was true that they might not be able to retain Rack and Ruin Villa for many years on the easy terms that now prevailed; but Billy would not hear of worrying over what the future might have in store for them. So he philosophized: "Let each day's work be sufficient for us; let us do our best in each situation that we meet; then we may not justly hold ourselves, or each other, in fault for what people are too prone to call 'mistakes.' And let everything we do be done as though these same conditions were to last forever. It is a better and a safer creed to live as though this life were eternal, than that nothing mattered but eternal life!"

But Jack had fine opportunity during these long days in the woods alone to hug to himself the secret that had grown so mightily since that never-to-be-forgotten night when he had

borne Pearl Mary home through the storm and darkness. The impression that had been made upon his mind and heart then was such that often—apropos of no voluntary suggestion and as sudden as a lightning's flash—the scene rose before him in colors so vivid that its effect upon him was that of a physical shock! He seemed actually to feel her form pressed close in his arms—her arm around his neck, the wind-flung lock of her wet hair as it brushed his cheek. And the pressure of her lips upon his in reward for his strength and gentleness warmed again in the magic of Memory!

But these remembrances were but tantalizing. He knew Pearl Mary had looked upon him always as a brother—had considered him just as any girl would consider her brother. They had been playmates almost since he could remember. She had bullied him not a little, too; and she had always been less lenient than other people with his faults. There was not a particle of evidence of her preference of him, that Jack could now see to bolster the hope that burned within him!

And he saw, too, the continuation of her confidential relations with Billy, with a bitterness that was not the easiest thing he had to bear. For Jack's was a loyal soul and to be, even in secret, a rival with his brother for Pearl Mary's favor, seemed arrant treachery! If Jack so keenly remembered when his heart cried out a warning to him—when his real feelings toward the girl were laid bare to his startled gaze—there was etched upon his mind in much deeper lines another picture. It was that of Billy and Pearl Mary in each other's arms the night that the girl had learned the truth about herself. Ah! that was a vision that haunted Jack without recess.

Sometimes it obsessed him so strongly that he flung down his ax and covered his eyes to try and shut out the scene. And so, sitting on a heap of the fenceposts one afternoon, his shoulders drooped and his head resting in his hands, a voice floated down to him from the summit of the knoll on which he had been at work.

"So *this* is a sample of your activity, is it, young man?"

From a frame of evergreen branches (he wondered trembly how long she had been there?) Pearl Mary's laughing face

looked down upon him. Under the red-lined hood of her cape the golden hair escaped, and her blue eyes danced at him, and her smile was quite bewitching.

"Sluggard, arise!" she cried. "Or is the day's work done? It will be dark before we get home. . . . See what a raid I have made?"

She burst through the clinging branches and came into view, with her arms full of pussy willows gathered at the edge of the creek.

"They're mighty pretty," said Jack, who had jumped up with face ablaze; but he looked straight into Pearl Mary's face when he said this, and it was her eyes only that he saw. She came lightly down the slope smiling, but with a good deal of color in her own cheeks. To cover his confusion—or because of it—Jack began to swing the ax mightily. An eight-inch butt wat bitten into by the flashing blade and felled in a couple of minutes.

"Don't you do it fine, Jack?" exclaimed the girl, watching him with real approval. "It's splendid to be big and strong, isn't it?"

Jack jerked out between blows, as he severed the tough limbs from the fallen tree: "But brains—go a good—deal farther. Ain't that—so, Mary? Look at—Billy, now—"

"Oh, well, *Billy!* There's only one Billy, of course," she admitted. "But a man must feel so much surer of himself when he's *strong*. He can do anything; he can get along anywhere. He's independent. He's so much better off than a woman—better off than all the Billies in the world, too. . . . Just think of how helpless *I* am, Jack," she added, with a sudden break in her voice.

He glanced up at her and saw what she meant in her face; but he could say nothing.

"It it wasn't for you good boys, what would become of me?" Pearl Mary pursued. "What would have happened to me long ago if you had not all been so kind to me? Suppose Father Heron and your dear mother, Jack, had refused to care for little orphan me—a nobody—a foundling—" "

They had never spoken of this before—never a word. Jack flung down the ax again and turned on her fiercely; the words were fairly wrenched from him when he interrupted her:

"Don't talk of it! I wish you had never known a word about it! I do! I do! And yet, how could we keep you from knowing the truth? I—I haven't been happy since; we never shall be happy again—as we used to be in the old days."

He brushed the back of his hand across his eyes and turned away from her once more, unable to hide his emotion—ashamed of it, too. The girl studied his averted face and her own countenance paled. She sighed. The branches of pussy willows slipped unnoticed from her arms, and her head drooped.

"No, it will never be again as it used to be," she whispered. Then in a moment she said, softly: "Isn't it time to go home now, Jack?"

He gathered the fallen buds when she turned away and carried them as well as the ax. They picked their path in silence over the knoll, down to the creek's edge. The short Spring day was dying shrived only by the monotone of a lone sparrow in the hedge. His call marked the loneliness of the scene; a depressing hush seemed to have fallen on all Nature.

Side by side, still without speaking, they came to the stepping-stones about which the shallow water brawled. The girl hesitated; they looked at each other covertly—guiltily. The thought was rife in both their minds—how easy it would be for Jack to gather her up in his arms and carry her across in safety! But the glances that mingled for an instant only, flashed apart, and—

"I—I'll steady you over—don't be afraid," said he, hoarsely, and plunged into the stream, offering her his hand.

He walked beside her as she stepped so lightly from stone to stone; and it was not until she was upon the other bank, dry-shod, that Pearl Mary saw he was not wearing his storm boots that day, but had waded through the stream almost to his knees. She dropped his hand instantly and he fell behind her as they followed the well defined path down the hillside toward home. And each step which brought them nearer to the little cottage, from

the windows of which the evening lamp already beamed, seemed to lead them farther apart.

For Jack Herron thought on Billy. Had he not been tempted to act the traitor toward his own brother? And Pearl Mary? Ah! she felt the gulf widening between them, but the reason for it was her own secret.

CHAPTER X.

THE HEN THAT LAYS THE GOLDEN EGG.

Further work of getting out the fence posts for Mr. Mendon had to be postponed, for there was a big job of spading before Jack, and as soon as he could get a fork into the ground he began to turn over the plot they had marked on the plan for potatoes and early peas. Mr. Herron helped at this too, and they got the first planting of peas in on the sixteenth of March, and the potatoes four days later. The smooth-seeded variety of peas will seldom rot, even if planted early in a wet Spring; if they suffer a spell of frost after getting above ground it will not set them back much. In planting the early potatoes Billy and his brother put plenty of straw in the furrow under them, for the double purpose of draining the soil if there should be much rain, and creating heat beneath the tubers.

These first plantings—even the careful cutting of the seed potatoes in which work Granny and Aunt Nannie helped—of course, were mighty interesting; but just about this time something happened that (in Pearl Mary's opinion, at least) quite overtopped everything else in interest. Every day she had stolen quietly into the cellar and given the setting hens opportunity to leave their nests and scratch a little in the grit she had thrown on the cement floor. She fed them whole corn, and a little pan of fresh water was always in view, and she refrained from letting both biddies off their nests at once. Now the first hen was three weeks on her eggs, and Pearl Mary ran up to tell the family delightedly that she had heard the first "cheep!" from under biddy's wings.

Billy and the girl had some talks upon "the hen industry." The cripple had read quite as much about poultry raising as Pearl Mary herself, and he had digested and retained the information better than she. He believed that it was the hen, not the goose, that lays the golden egg in these times; but every hen does not prove a gold-mine for her owner. Many a man has the satisfac-

tion of eating fresh-laid eggs for his breakfast at about six times the market price!

But the cheapness, or expense of keeping poultry did not enter much into the discussion of Billy and his sister just then. They had decided that the old-fashioned way of leaving the newly-hatched chickens for some days with the mother and then "weaning" them, was an exploded doctrine. If incubator-hatched chickens (which are admittedly more weakly than the general run of those hatched under the hen) can thrive without the care of a mother, why should not hen-hatched chickens start at once to look out for themselves? And the percentage of chicks killed by the foolish mothers stepping on them, or pecking them because they happen to be "off-color," is to be considered, too. with her arms full of pussy willows gathered at the edge of the creek.

Therefore, as the chicks broke shell, Pearl Mary brought each into the house and put it in a basket lined with cotton-wool, behind the stove. Having treated the setting-hens kindly they were not wild, and did not object to being handled while the chicks were hatching. Some of the chicks that just "pipped" the shell were helped through by the girl's dexterous fingers, and warmed to life and strength in the basket. Usually such weaklings get little chance when left under the mother, and seldom even get out of the shell; or, if they do get out, are likely to be crushed by the hen. All but one of the first setting of eggs hatched, and the entire fifteen under the second hen produced lusty chicks. This is not remarkable when well-bred eggs are used. One chick died in the basket soon after being brought into the house—indeed, before they were fed; but there were left 28 apparently healthy and vigorous chicks.

"Now, Sis," said Billy, seriously, "the chicken farm is started. Those 28 chicks are your capital. And they must serve you to experiment with. In raising them you should learn to raise a much larger flock next year, if all goes well. These are the real 'early birds,' but they'll need to catch a lot more than worms! Variety is more than the spice of life to the chicken; a variety of food is absolutely necessary to its well-being. . . . And now,

a March cockerel should make a July broiler; and a March pullet should begin to lay in September. Let's see if you can bring your family up in the way it should go."

The boys found time to build the henhouse which they had promised Pearl Mary. Not that she would have use for it at once; but there was enough paint left from the cottage to give this little shelter a couple of coats, and the boys desired to get rid of the unsightly pile of lumber they had saved for the structure. Even the moveable chicken run and brooder were painted and were rather ornamental on the front grass plot. As Jack moved them every day the chicks did no harm to the grass-roots.

And as for the 28 downy yellow balls running about in the spring sunshine, they certainly were attractive. Their shrill "cheeps" as they chased each other with bits of food or straw in their bills, and the avidity with which they ate, showed that they did not miss the hen and that the homemade brooder was quite a good substitute for her. When it rained or the weather was particularly raw, Jack carried the brooder into the cellar and the chicks exercised on the floor there; but settled spring weather—warm if showery—soon set in, and the "early birds" thrived.

The change from the city tenement to this country environment, and the resultant outdoor exercise, had done greater good to Mr. Herron, perhaps, than to any of the family.

He had the appetite of a boy, he slept like a child, and he was able to turn off almost as much work as Jack himself; only, what he did could be nothing involving the exercise of judgment. If shown how to do simple tasks, he would keep to work all day without complaint.

Now that the grass had begun to spring the fertility of the soil about the burned mansion was shown by the rich green color and lush growth of the lawn.

Billy set his father to raking the accumulated litter of two seasons off the lawns, and the debris was heaped in the driveway and burned. This was a job occupying Mr. Herron's time for some days, and he was busily engaged in it when the first harbinger of Spring appeared—or, at least, so Billy called it. This wasn't a bluebird, but a most disreputable speci-

men of the genus tramp. He hailed Billy in the professional whine, claiming to be looking for work but at that moment merely suffering for a square meal.

"All right," said Billy, briskly. "You better stay right out there in the road, and I'll speak to my sister and see if she can give you a sandwich. If you come in here you might see what you say you're looking for, and in your delicate health the shock would be too much for you."

The fellow grinned in appreciation of this sarcasm, and took no offence. He leaned his elbows on the masonry and watched Mr. Herron at work with the rake. He was a man upwards of fifty, with a blowsy complexion, the fine purple veins often caused by the use of liquor to excess plainly visible in his cheeks. He wore a heavy, red-roan mustache, as coarse as horsehair; but otherwise was cleanly shaven and must have been, in his youth, a good-looking man. But his dress was slovenly, his light blue eyes were narrow and glanced from side to side slyly—altogether his was a most untrustworthy face.

He seemed to find Mr. Herron's countenance interesting, for he stared at it most of the time while he was waiting for the lunch Billy had promised him. By and by Mr. Herron saw the tramp as he raked nearer the road-wall. The unfortunate gentleman seldom noticed any stranger, but this man he looked at several times and finally nodded to him gravely.

"Same ter you, pop!" responded the tramp, grinning and nodding in return. Then he looked at Billy, jerked his thumb at Mr. Herron, who had moved on, and said, coarsely: "Off his nannie a little, ain't he? The old gent, I mean."

"My father is a trifle eccentric," said Billy, gravely.

"An' he's all right at that!" ejaculated the tramp, quickly. "No offense meant, boss. . . . Gee! that looks good."

This last exclamation was called forth by the appearance of Pearl Mary from the house with a big sandwich wrapped in tissue paper and a cup of steaming tea. The tramp seized the latter, nodded to the girl with a grin, and drank her health with gusto. Then he began ravenously upon the sandwich as Pearl Mary turned back toward the house.

It was just then that Billy saw his father standing near the tramp again and watching him with evident interest. The eyes of the wayfarer were on the girl, who passed so gracefully up the driveway. Mr. Herron leaned over the wall and touched the man's arm. The vague expression which usually marred his appearance had departed from his eyes, and both his thought and gaze seemed concentrated on the stranger who turned at the touch to look at him.

Mr. Herron said, quietly: "She was only a baby when you saw her last. You would not have known her now, would you?"

The tramp stared at him, poised his sandwich in the air, and with his mouth open for another huge bite. His florid face began to whiten and his watery eyes were round. "Say, what you givin' us?" he murmured.

Then some thought seemed to prick his memory into life. He turned his head jerkily and looked after the girl again; then he saw Billy, who, amazed, had heard and seen it all.

"What's this guy's name—heh?" asked the tramp, huskily, with a nod at the cripple's father.

"Our name is Herron. Do you—"

"Herron!" The man's face actually blanched. His weak eyes blinked in apparent fright. He favored Mr. Herron with a single quick glance, and then lumbered off down the road without uttering another word. Billy called after him and even started in pursuit; but on his cane he could not hobble as fast as the tramp's clumsy dog-trot carried *him* over the ground. In two minutes the man was out of sight around a turn in the road.

Billy came back to his father. Mr. Herron stood leaning on the rake, wiping his brow wearily, and with the old puzzled look in his eyes. "Am I—am I doing this right, Billy?" he asked, in his childish way. It was no use to try to get at what had happened—what the scene had meant. If there had been a rift in the cloud upon Mr. Herron's mind, the aperture was closed again; if what he had said to the tramp meant anything at all, Billy could not arouse his father's interest in it again, nor get at the meaning of it.

About this time Jack and his father were getting the onion patch forked over. Luckily it was rich soil, for, as before stated, they had little manure with which to fertilize it. The compost heap they had begun to build would not be fit for use until the following season—or until Fall, at the very earliest.

And, by the way, a word about that compost heap might not be amiss. The careful gardener lets nothing go to waste. Everything of a vegetable nature that will decompose should go into such a heap. Billy and Jack marked out a space 10 by 20 feet, within which the big fellow excavated a trench three feet deep. Into this pit had gone some green stable manure that Jack had hauled from the village when they were making their hotbed, and all the waste grass and weed-stalks gathered in the garden; leaves, lawn-rakings, such swill as came from their table, sods, and all similar refuse, each layer of a foot or so being well tramped down and covered with three or four inches of earth, and plenty of water flung upon it to hasten its decomposition. Gradually the pile loomed above the ground, as they added to it; but as Jack kept the refuse well covered and smoothed down, it was not offensive and, later in the season, was made really ornamental. A thick carpet of grass grew on the sides, which Billy kept smoothly clipped, and on the squared-off top Pearl Mary had a bed of pansies, the seed of which she had started in shallow boxes in the house, away back in February.

They sowed some early beet and spinash seed before April first, but not until All-Fools' Day did they begin to plant the onion seed. By that time the bulk of the great patch had been forked over. Jack pulverized and smoothed it with the garden rake in sections 10 or 12 feet wide. Then he began marking the rows and sowing the seed with the aid of Billy's planter. This latter implement worked very well indeed, although it wasted more seed than a patented seeder. In sowing the onion seed Jack skipped each seventh row right across the bed to facilitate the weeding and cultivating of the crop. While he smoothed, marked, and sowed the seed, Mr. Herron finished the spading of the piece, and at the end of the week the seed was all in and each narrow bed

was lightly raked crosswise. The patch looked like a great, brown bedquilt.

Meanwhile the first planting of peas was breaking the soil, and the young farmers began to look anxiously for the first potato leaf. As soon as the peas showed their tender green leaves Jack began cultivating them, loosening the soil along the rows and cutting off every weed that dared show its head. On the seventh day after the first onion seeds were planted, that end of the bed began to be speckled with weeds. Nature has ruled that the hardest thing to kill and the easiest thing to sprout and grow is a weed seed. On Billy's advice Jack began raking the onion patch lightly, working lengthwise of the rows, and so destroying the springing weeds without materially disturbing the more slowly germinating onion seeds below.

It was a joyous morning for the Herrons when the first rows of onions broke ground. "Ah!" exclaimed Billy, with a sigh of relief, "now *my* work begins. From now on most of my time will be spent on my knees in this patch. Once the weeds get ahead of you in an onion patch, and it is cheaper to plow it up and plant over again than to try to find your onions. . . . Jack, you and father and Sis have been doing the hard work so far. Now *I* can be of some use," cried Billy, who sometimes fretted because he was not as active as the others.

"Goodness me!" said Pearl Mary. "I'd like to know what you call what you've done?"

"That doesn't sound grammatical somehow," agreed Jack; "but it is to the point just the same. How would we get along if it wasn't for you, Billy? Your brains are worth all the rest of the family's put together."

"Aw—brains!" responded Billy, with disgust.

CHAPTER XI.

GETTING THE BEST OF DAME NATURE.

The outlook before the Herrons at this time was not the most roseate; Billy gritted his teeth in secret, but wore openly a smile of good cheer. Jack was busy all the time, so did not fret; but Pearl Mary found her hands idle for a part of each day. "And I'll just go crazy if I don't do something, Billy!" she declared, half weeping.

Billy laughed, his brown eyes sparkling as he looked up at her. He was on his knees, stirring the soil in the hotbed with a five-fingered weeding fork. The plants under glass were doing famously. Had the weather been propitious Jack would already have had all the early onions transplanted into the open; but more than half had been set out—and the early beets, too. The tomato plants were doing finely in one end of the bed; but they were somewhat "spindling"—and so close together! It was wonderful how many seeds there had been in each packet.

"What sort of a saleswoman do you think you would make, Sis?" asked Billy, after his long look at her.

"I don't know. You don't want me to go out to sell onions, do you?"

"No, no!" chuckled Billy. "But look at all these tomato plants. They are of a splendid variety, too. The seedsmen sell pot-grown plants of this kind for sixty cents per dozen—and the purchaser has to pay expressage. We've a heap more than we can ever use, Sis."

"But it's too early to sell tomato plants," said his sister, doubtfully.

"Of course. I am looking forward a month and more. Meantime these plants should be potted and hardened off in a cold frame. We haven't a cold frame——"

"What's the difference between a hotbed and a cold frame, Billy?" interposed the girl.

"Little, saving that the cold frame has no heat under it—no

manure, you know. I'm going to knock together some sort of a box over in that corner to use in hardening off plants. They need to be covered nights and cold, stormy days, but when it is warm should have all the air and light possible. Glass isn't really necessary for a cold frame. Cheap cotton cloth stretched on a light framework will do almost as well. . . . But what I'm getting at in this: We've got hundreds of healthy tomato plants that we might sell to good advantage in the middle of May. We could get forty cents a dozen for them, potted—”

“But the pots, Billy!” cried Mary. “Just think of what they cost.”

“Billy's whimsical look returned. “I'd been thinking about that. If you'll undertake to go about Medway—even to the outskirts of the city—and get orders for the plants, Sis, I'll supply the pots. I wager I can furnish a couple of thousand pots for less than a dollar.”

“Goodness! how will you do that?”

“Will you try to sell the plants?”

“Of course, I will.”

“All right. Then I'll show you how to make the pots,” said Billy, with confidence. “In fact, there are several ways of making paper-pots which occur to me. For instance, we might buy some ordinary manilla envelopes—say 6 by 10 inches—with end flaps. Paste the flap down and cut the envelope in two, making two flapless envelopes. Fill 'em with dirt, well pressed down, and set your plant in it. Such pots set side by side will do very well indeed. But I'll show you a better and more workmanlike plan.”

In one corner of the cellar, now that the setting hens were out of the way, Jack had set up a rough workbench. Billy pawed over a box of old iron and found a 4½-inch bolt with a rivet head. He sawed a three-inch block from a piece of dressed scantling which was about 2½ inches square, and bored a hole through the center of the block big enough for the bolt. Then he bored a similar hole through the bench, near the edge, and bolted bench and block tightly together, with the flat head of the bolt on the top of the standing block of wood. He cut a piece of stiff manilla paper, or thin cardboard, 10 inches long by 4½ inches wide. He

stood this paper on one long edge, passed it around the block, folding it tightly, and then creased and folded down the protruding top of the paper box, to close it. To secure these folds in place and make the bottom of the paper-pot, Billy used a sharp three-ounce tack. Pressing the tack through the folds of paper with his thumb until the point brought up against the flat head of the bolt, he gave the tack-head several sharp taps with a light hammer. The tack-point curled up and fastened the paper folds securely, he slipped the paper off the block, and there was as neat a $2\frac{1}{2}$ -inch folder as one would wish.

"And it holds the dirt beautifully!" cried Pearl Mary, when she had tried it.

"Of course. Paper pots have superseded clay pots with the big nurserymen for some years, although I doubt if many make them quite as cheaply as this. Packed well with earth, the plant pressed into it, and the pots stacked closely side by side, these pots will hold the transplants securely. By the time we take them out of the cold frame the pots should be full of roots. To set them in the garden all we must do is to saturate the contents of the pot, tear off the paper, and set out the plant in its proper place. Mr. Tomato will never know he has been moved."

"Oh, Billy! how smart you are!"

"Other people's brains supplied this idea," retorted the cripple.
"Only I happened to remember it."

Billy bought the paper at the wholesale house in town and had it cut to size; while Pearl Mary herself folded the pots, and it did not take long. Meanwhile, with some rough boards, Jack and Billy made the cold frame—just a boxlike structure on top of the ground, one side several inches higher than the other, so as to give the cloth-covered frames the proper slant. Of course, they were bound to lose some of the young plants; but those that lived grew lustily and amply repaid the care given them, for they grew stocky, branched well, and were ready for transplanting into the open as soon as the danger of frost was passed.

But Billy had another problem that troubled him a whole lot. As the work increased in all departments he saw that, unless he called on Jack for considerable assistance, the onion-patch was

bound to get ahead of him! The tender green shoots grew finely; but the weeds developed apace and hand-weeding certainly would not do, the whole season through.

When he chanced to be in the village one day he saw a small boy trundling for a hoople a broad-tired iron wheel, about eighteen inches in diameter. He called the boy to him, and, after some good-natured bargaining, the wheel changed owners for a nickel. Billy took the wheel to the local blacksmith shop, and after pawing over the "junk heap" for half an hour, found several discarded pieces of wrought iron which the blacksmith sold him cheaply, and which the man, under Billy's instructions, heated and brought into the proper forms.

In the end the smith bolted the prongs he had made to an iron axle on which the wheel turned smoothly. To these prongs was welded a socket, and from this joint there extended down behind the wheel another pair of prongs to which was riveted the sharp blade of a narrow hoe that Billy had likewise found "in the discard." Altogether the invention cost him less than a dollar and a half, and when Billy had fitted a pair of handles into the socket with which to push the machine, he had as practical a wheel-hoe as he needed for the work in hand.

The best of this was, the cripple could use it himself. His withered leg did not seem to tire as easily as at first, and although he still dragged it, he often got about for short distances without the aid of his cane. The necessary pushing and pulling action of the wheel-hoe was quite easy for him to accomplish.

Jack was trying in odd hours to complete the tally of the fence posts he was getting out for Mr. Mendon, for they needed the money sorely. All that Aunt Nannie could make with Pearl Mary's help, and some of the little hoard Billy had clung to so tenaciously, had to be spent each week for their food; hard work in the open bred wolfish appetites, and, as Billy declared, "it takes fuel to make steam!"

The potted tomato plants came on so famously that before May first the girl started out to get orders in the village, and she neglected no house where there was room for a garden. Most housewives appreciate the value of the tomato as a table vegetable

and realize that the better quality of fruit is always high in price. Although the tomato seems an easy vegetable to raise, probably fifty per cent. of the people who set out tomato plants in the Spring get little or no fruit from them, because of neglect or ignorance in their management; but the next Spring the same people will buy tomato plants and hope for "better luck." Hope springs eternal in the amateur tomato-growers breast!

The result of Mary's first day's canvas were orders for 20 dozen plants, to be delivered between the fifteenth and twentieth of May, weather permitting. The next day she boarded the electric car and rode towards the city, getting off where the suburban homes clustered on the various new plats. Perhaps a girl salesman was a novelty; or there was something especially winning about Pearl's Mary's pretty face and pleasant manner. She came home at night with a longer list of orders than she obtained in Medway. Her success cheered them all. Billy figured that they could spare more than a hundred dozen plants, the profit on which would be about 90 per cent., without counting the labor of raising them, which, at this time, was an "unknown quantity."

"But it's about as easy to care for a thousand young plants as for a hundred," Jack ventured. "Why, Billy! with a little more glass, next season we could make a good thing out of this business alone."

"And pansies," said Pearl Mary. "I asked a florist down by Englewood. He said that a hotbed the size of ours will raise two thousand pansy plants, which are worth three cents apiece at wholesale."

"Mary would rather raise pansies than onions," chuckled Billy.

When the time came to fill the orders Jack got Mr. Short's express wagon (working for that neighbor a day to pay for its use), and, taking Pearl Mary with him, he delivered all the plants, saving those which could easily be carried in a basket to Medway and the immediate neighborhood. These his sister delivered herself, and within a week she collected for the plants between forty-four and forty-five dollars, which was a veritable godsend to the Herrons in their then financial condition!

When it came to raising tomatoes himself, Billy asked odds of nobody. He had long studied the problem, and had experimented years before when the Herrons had lived where he and Jack each had his own little garden-plot. With these plants he proceeded to get the best of Dame Nature, as he called it, in the following fashion: When the plant was well rooted in the soil (he set them four feet apart) he thrust down beside it a stick five or six feet long and as the plant grew he tied the main stalk and the sturdier branches to the stake. The flowers spring on the heavier branches, while long fronds, or clusters of leaves, branch out and grow lustily. These leaf clusters Billy pinched back, going around each plant once a week during the season of growth, reducing the length of each frond about two-thirds. As a result all the strength of the plant went into the fruit, when it set, and reducing the amount of vegetation allowed the sun to get to the fruit, on all sides, so aiding materially in its ripening.

While the plants were young a little slaked lime dusted on them kept the pests away; but by and by the ugly, great tomato worms appeared and had to be picked off by hand. All in all, however, the Herrons were troubled little by garden pests. The onions were free of any blight and even the usually prevalent potato-bug did not appear. There was reason for this last fact, in that the ground had been lying idle for some seasons. It seems to take the potato beetle two years to find a new patch of tubers.

The season was promising, although May was rather dry; but the land was moist and the long rows of tender green onion-tops alternating with the ribbons of brown earth between, made an attractive picture. They picked their first "mess" of peas for the house on June 8th. On June 17th Billy went along the potato rows and carefully dug out enough tubers for dinner; they were as large as hens' eggs. Radishes, salad, turnips, carrots, beans and the early cabbage came in June; but these were only for home consumption. The eyes of the anxious gardeners were fixed upon the onions and the soldierly looking tomato plants. It was a race between those vegetables as to which should come to the rescue of the family—in other words, which should be in marketable condition first. Scallions were quoted at \$1.50 per hundred

bunches; but Billy held his brother back from pulling more than a few for their own table.

As for Pearl Mary's chicks, they had grown like weeds. In the first place, she and Billy had chosen the breed of poultry with rare judgment. We hear a great deal now-a-days about the hen being a mere egg machine, and that the breed that produces the most eggs is the most profitable to keep. But Billy did not believe this statement—not in toto; and he explained to his sister his reasons for differing with some of the poultry articles they read.

"Take, for instance, our present situation. Small as your flock will be, you cannot let it run at large. We cannot fence the garden, and you have a comfortable run for the cockerels and pullets when they are grown. Some breeds of poultry will not do well unless they have a wide range; and among such breeds are those which lay the most eggs. You shut those egg-producers into a yard, and if they do not suffer for want of exercise, they'll eat you out of house and home!"

"On the other hand take the Asiatic fowl. They are big-boned, it is true, and the careless poultry-keeper objects to their heavily feathered shanks. But dry yards and warm winter-quarters will keep the Brahmans and Langshans as spick and span as race-horses. And then, for the first three months the chicks put on flesh faster than the Mediterranean breeds and their crosses, and on a good deal less food than more rangy chicks. We chose the Light Brahma for our stock. Grown to perfection they make the heaviest dressed poultry and as handsome as any in the market; and no breed has much advantage of them in egg-production *if one weighs the eggs*, for they lay a large and meaty one. You can shut twenty of them into a run 20 by 20 feet, and they will thrive. Being of sluggish temperament, the roosters do not fight, and so put on flesh at smaller cost. The hens are always motherly and are never wild under decent treatment. The cockerels up to three months old cannot be beaten as broilers. It is true that, for the next three months, they do not kill handsomely, because their framework is growing so fast; but after six months, with a few rations of corn a week, a cockerel will put on the plumpness and assume almost the weight of a hen-turkey."

Their choice proved to be a wise one insofar as the production of broilers within the specified time was concerned. Early in June they culled out half a dozen cockerels, killed and dressed them, and sold them locally for 38 cents a pound. The six brought \$2.80. The highest prices for broilers are paid earlier in the season; after July first they are heavier and the price sags. To get the best of the market the hatching must be done from November to March. The second half dozen of Pearl Mary's flock weighed nearly two pounds each and brought \$3.12. Later they sold the remaining four cockerels for \$2.25, making altogether a return of \$8.17. The eggs cost \$4.00, and they spent \$3.00 for food and incidentals for all the chicks, and beside the \$1.17 profit now had ten handsome pullets (two chicks had died during the season) and Pearl Mary had a lot of experience. None of the cockerels had been saved, for Billy believed that it was wiser to buy a well-bred rooster in the fall to run with the flock, even if it cost five dollars.

"From this little flock I expect you to breed a fine family next year, and the year after you should have 500 chickens at least," said Billy, smiling at the delighted girl. "So far the balance is on the right side; but remember that your flock was so small that you could watch each individual member of it, and so ward off disease. When there is a larger number, you will have greater losses. Yet the profits will be greater, too, if you act wisely. Now, without counting the time it takes to care for the poultry, wherein is the biggest expense, Sis?"

"The corn and wheat we buy," sighed Pearl Mary.

"Right! Go to the head of the class. And now, sister mine, I will divulge my great secret. It is at the root of successful poultry raising. I have studied it out. Take one year with another, the losses are apt to be quite as large as the profits in handling large flocks, unless the poultryman can raise the greater part of his own hen-food. No poultryman can be sure of success unless he has enough acreage to grow sufficient corn for the use of his flock. And we must begin that next year. We must put in a yellow flint corn, build a crib, and husk enough corn in the Fall to carry 500 chickabiddies through the following season. Other-

wise we shall not be getting out of our chicks all the profit there is in them."

"Oh, Billy!" cried Pearl Mary, her hands clasped and her eyes big. "Do you really think we can do it?"

"That is what we must aim for," he declared.

"Billy! Billy!" she whispered. "It's *big!* It's so big an idea that I daren't think of it. And we with scarcely twenty dollars between us and absolute starvation!"

Billy's thin face broke into a slow, but grave, smile. "I guess it's the living out of doors and digging in the dirt that makes a fellow feel so courageous, and as though he could do *anything* if he tried hard enough. But we've set up the target, Sis; let us get as many arrows as we can, clean in the bullseye!"

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CHAPTER XII.

THE THREATENING CLOUD.

The young Herrons were indeed dreaming of big things these days. It was not long before they shipped their first five hundred bunches of scallions to a produce dealer whom Billy had seen on one of his trips to town. They had to pay 60 cents expressage on the crate, but the scallions brought \$1.50 per hundred bunches, and after deducting his commission the dealer sent them his check for \$6.75. In a week they sent him twice as many and the price remained the same. But the commissions and transportation charges bit into the profits of the business.

About this time their earliest tomatoes ripened, and Billy determined to sell these at retail, and so get all there was to be made out of them. His cultivation of the tomato plants had resulted in large, smooth, and handsome fruit. A dozen of them filled one of the peach baskets in which fruit is packed by the Georgia and California fruit growers, and Pearl Mary sold the first few baskets to certain wealthy households in Medway, and on the line of the trolley to town, for fifty and sixty cents per basket. Throughout the entire season she disposed of none of the finest fruit for less than thirty cents per dozen. It pays to grade vegetables and fruit; but the poorest in the box regulates the price, every time.

The care the boys used in thinning out the onion-patch told in the general result of that crop, too. No matter how good the seed may be, there will be many onions that would never grow to any size—many that will not produce a ball at all. These are true scallions and must be culled out, anyway, if the final harvest of fully grown onions is to be clean. They thinned the growing plants to an inch apart in the row, and during the first six weeks marketed \$60 worth of bunched scallions. The price went down to \$1.10 a hundred bunches; but even then it paid well. Pearl Mary, despite her rooted objection to onions, learned to bunch them expertly; indeed, she and Aunt Nannie did most of that

work. Billy was able to take almost entire care of the onion patch and Jack got out the final number of posts wanted by Mr. Mendon.

These activities took them to the first of August. At last their income was greater than their living expenses—there was a little surplus each week. For the first time since that gloomy evening when “bad luck” had faced the Herrons in the little flat in town, that bugbear seemed really on the run. And while they were congratulating themselves on this fact, the unexpected happened—as it always does.

During the Summer the Medway Pike, on which the Darnell place fronted, was a frequently traveled road for automobilists and handsome family carriages. Although there were only a few so-called “gentlemen’s estates” in the neighborhood, between Medway and the city there were many fine houses, and the Medway road offered a smooth and well-shaded drive. Billy had taken advantage of the passing-by of so many vehicles of the class above-mentioned, to place on the wall near the gateway a neat, glass-covered box, in which reposed in the shade, from day to day, samples of such fresh vegetables as the garden produced. In this way he sold much of his truck at fancy prices.

Pearl Mary took full charge of this branch of the industry. No carriage or car stopped before the gateway that the girl did not see; and she immediately ran out to drive a thrifty bargain with the occupants of the vehicle. It must be confessed that Billy sometimes watched her with a worried countenance. Ever since the appearance of the mysterious tramp whom his father seemed to recognize as having been associated with Pearl Mary in the past, Billy was fearful of some similar incident occurring. Of course, Mr. Herron may have been no more responsible for what he said to the tramp than he was for his other acts and speeches since suffering from his mental trouble.

But two things about the related incident disturbed Billy vastly. His father really seemed to have obtained a grip on himself, and on his memory, during those few moments that he was addressing the man with the roan mustache—that was one point; the other was that the tramp had been undeniably startled both by what

Mr. Herron had said to him, and by his discovery of their family name. Never a day went by that Billy did not look fearfully for the reappearance of the stranger who had so stirred his father's memory—or his imagination!

Suppose the man with the roan mustache was really the person who had given Pearl Mary, as a baby, to the Herrons? Suppose the fellow was the link between the girl and her mysterious past? The thought haunted Billy, waking and sleeping. He feared that the girl might come upon the fellow and learn the truth at a time when he, Billy, was not by to shield her. He suspected that the real wound she had suffered because of the discovery made through Veronica Calvert's treachery was the fact of her doubtful parentage.

She was not likely to stumble upon any clue to the hidden past from the people she sold tomatoes to, however; and many of the carriages stopped regularly through the season for supplies of the fruit. It was in this way that Pearl Mary became acquainted with the Van Coes. Their turnout was one of the finest that drove through Medway. The horses shone like satin, the carriage wheeled over the road on its heavy rubber tires without a jar, the cushions of drab upholstery were as satisfying as the best feather bed; and with the two liveried men on the seat the most exacting could have found no fault.

Miss Van Coe—a pale, delicate girl, with light hair, light eyebrows, and light eyes—and her companion, or governess, were the occupants of the carriage when it first stopped. The companion was a stout, wonderfully corseted German woman, who spoke sonorously, and even commanded the coachman to "Drive on!" with the gesture and the tone of a tragedy queen! Pearl Mary thought that Miss Van Coe might have been some fun, had she not been so languid, for she caught a smile in the young lady's faded eyes when the governess bargained for the tomatoes with the air of one conducting the negotiations for a most important transaction.

But all Miss Van Coe managed to say to Pearl Mary, even after the carriage had stopped on several afternoons, was: "How very lovely and quiet it is here. Too bad that nice house burned

down, you know. . . . Is—is the owner contemplating building again, do you know, Miss?"

Pearl Mary told her that the place was on the market. Mr. Mendon had put no sign up, for he had no expectation of being able to find a purchaser until real estate sales picked up—and that might not be for some years. But the very next day, when the fine carriage stopped, Mr. Van Coe himself was with his daughter. He was a white-vested, pompous-looking gentleman, with a closely trimmed gray beard and wore eyeglasses through which his glance was as hard as the crystal itself!

He did not deign to ask Pearl Mary any questions about the place, but while his daughter selected and paid for the basket of tomatoes, Mr. Van Coe stood up in the carriage and overlooked the neatly trimmed lawn (Mr. Mendon had furnished the boys with a lawn-mower), the well-kept drive and paths, and the artistically laid-out grounds immediately surrounding the foundations of the burned villa and stable. The remodeled toolhouse detracted not at all from the good appearance of the place. Jack had built and screened a platform at the back of the little cottage which they used for a Summer kitchen; but this was entirely out of view from the road. Aunt Nannie's vines climbing about the windows and upon either side of the front door, added not a little to the attractiveness of that end of the grounds. A hemlock hedge cut off the view of the young orchard and berry patch, and the garden beyond.

Mr. Van Coe nodded to his daughter as he seated himself and the carriage rolled on. Pearl Mary heard him say: "Quite as you told me, Louise. The outlook is all that could be desired, and there would be no possibility of our being crowded by neighbors here."

Pearl Mary stood stock still in the roadway, and let the eddy of dust raised by the wheels settle about her. Her face actually blanched as she gazed wide-eyed after the carriage. There seemed suddenly to have been a hoop riveted about her body—her heart-beats were really painful!

The words she had overheard could suggest but one thing. The Van Coes were attracted by the place, and contemplated its

purchase. What would happen to the Herrons in that case? The family had been so busy that the thought of losing all they had put into Rack and Ruin Villa had seldom troubled them. Billy's cheerful optimism had led them all to work as though the present conditions would be always maintained.

But what Pearl Mary overheard foreshadowed a sad shock to Billy, and to them all! Perhaps they would be obliged immediately to vacate the premises. The girl wrung her hands at the thought. "Oh, oh!" she cried, under her breath. "How can I ever tell Billy—and Jack? How *can* I? After all our toil—and our great hopes—and the opportunities that seem to be opening before us! Ah, dear me! can *I* be the messenger of such ill-tidings to these who have done so much for me? How can I! how can I!"

She actually wept, and it was a long time before she dared appear before any other member of the family, for fear that she would be questioned. She decided to say nothing about what she had overheard and suspected. "Suppose nothing comes of it?" she reasoned. "Suppose Mr. Mendon does not sell the place, after all? Why disturb Billy's mind and make everybody anxious? I'll keep it to myself." But it preyed upon her during the next few weeks until the whole family, as in Jack's case, noticed and commented upon it. Nor did they rightly guess her trouble; neither Jack's continued gloom nor Pearl Mary's growing silence was correctly diagnosed, even by the philosophical Billy.

Meanwhile, the boys were straining every effort to get out of the ground all that the soil had to give. Away back in May, when the hotbed had been emptied of the early plants, Billy had his father spade the bed over again, and when it was well pulverized, he planted winter cabbage seed, some Brussel sprouts, parsley, and salad for later transplanting to the open. As soon as the cabbage was big enough they set the thriftier plants in the garden wherever there chanced to be room for them—notably where the early peas and beans had been. The soil being so rich, two crops could easily be grown on the same patch without further fertilization. Where Billy had planted his early carrots and radishes together they really gathered three crops in

one season, for the radishes were out of the way before the carrots were of any size, and after the carrots were all pulled, they forked the bed over and set out the Brussel sprouts and cabbages.

"Talk about Chinese gardening!" exclaimed Jack. "We beat the Chinks, I do believe. We're going to get a lot of stuff off of this little piece, Billy."

"As long as the farmer puts back into the soil as much as he takes out in each crop, there is no reason why he should not get two and three crops off of every square yard of tillable ground," said Billy. "Wise market-gardeners do. Better to have a well enriched and well cultivated acre than five acres of poor soil.

"Consider the farmer of Brittany. There intensive farming has been carried on for generations. And the farmers are a tenant class, too, for the most part. A family can be kept in comfort there upon the proceeds from a quarter of an acre of land. If the Brittany agriculturist worked twenty acres after the same method that he does his quarter, or half acre, he would be a millionaire."

"The soil must be mighty rich over there," observed Jack; "or else it doesn't cost much to live in Brittany."

"Of course, the soil is rich—and the farmer has enriched it himself. The topsoil is his capital—and it should be so with any man who follows methods of intensive farming. Eighteen inches of the top soil of a farm in Brittany belongs to the tenant; it is as much his as the tools he uses, or his household chattels. It is so agreed in the lease, and when the farmer moves, he moves his top soil to the new farm that he has hired."

"Say! that would be no easy job," remarked Jack, with some doubt in his tone.

"I have read," said Billy, "that often a farmer who moves in that country can get his household possessions and all his family into one of the great, two-wheeled wains which they use there; but behind this wagon is a procession of twenty or more other wains heaped with the top soil that he has spent years in fertilizing, and enriching, until it is as valuable as potting soil in a nursery.

"But American farmers—especially truck gardeners—are

learning a whole lot nowadays about how to concentrate their efforts. It is cheaper to obtain two crops in a season from the same piece of ground by heavy fertilizing than to work a patch twice as big for the same result. In market gardening land is not now allowed to lie fallow; there are ways of putting back into the soil after each crop all the humus that the crop has taken out of it. An idle patch of ground is as much of a detriment to a truck grower as an idle workman."

These, and similar dissertations, which had once interested Pearl Mary as much as they did Jack, no longer seemed to hold the girl's attention. When she heard the boys planning for the future, as that future was connected with their occupancy of Rack and Ruin Villa, she usually walked away. She was afraid they would read in her face the fear she felt that their weeks—perhaps their days—on the place were numbered.

The Van Coe carriage did not come any more to the gate, but Pearl Mary watched for the reappearance of Mr. Van Coe himself, and feared every day that Billy would hear through Mr. Mendon that the place was sold. So there was very good reason why the young girl should appear distraught and changed in her manner. Billy looked back to her discovery of the mystery of her birth as the fundamental cause of her evident anxiety; therefore, the cripple tried to show himself more than usually confidential and brotherly toward her. And Jack saw this sympathy expressed and viewed his brother's intimacy with Pearl Mary from quite a different standpoint.

They were all three at cross-purposes; and yet nobody was to blame. But even Billy did not get at the nub of the girl's trouble. Oh, no indeed! She was determined not to add to his burden and woriments by telling him of Van Coe. And one day when she saw Mr. Mendon stop his pacer at the gateway, and that he had with him in his carriage the pompous, white-waist-coated Van Coe himself, Pearl Mary was only glad that Billy and Jack were both out of sight of the carriage. She went down to the road to let down the chains for the real estate man, if he should wish to drive in.

As she approached she distinctly heard Van Coe say: "I suppose these squatters can be got rid of at once?"

Mr. Mendon's reply she did not hear, and the real estate man started his horse again, and did not look in her direction. He might not have seen her at all; but the man with him had looked directly at Pearl Mary when he asked his question. The swift little horse took the carriage quickly out of sight along the road; and after that day the threatening cloud that the girl had seen rising on their horizon, loomed blacker than ever.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BOLT FROM THE CLOUD.

As the season advanced their labor did not decrease—and this was perhaps a very good thing for the trio of young folks. Idleness would surely have bred trouble for them, for Jack was moody, Pearl Mary sometimes showed strange irritability, and there was a serious cast to Billy's countenance most of the time that had not been his wonted expression. And yet the burden of material responsibility was lighter for them all. Their venture seemed to be working out in a most satisfactory manner.

Some little addition to the income along in July came from the small fruits in the old garden. Mr. Darnell had originally set out some fine raspberries, blackberries and currants, and they sold more than ten dollars' worth in the village. The peach trees were heavily laden with fruit, too. In July Billy showed his brother how to prune these fruit trees.

"You can prune shade trees all the year around," said the crippled boy; "but if you cut back fruit trees in the Fall or early Spring, the tree is likely to make more wood than fruit. After the "June fall," as it is called, one can see how the peach crop promises, and cut accordingly. And thinning out the fruit bearing branches, and plucking the fruit that touch each other, will do what that pinching-back process does for our tomatoes. The peaches will be larger and will ripen more evenly."

Particularly did they cut back the tops of the trees, for almost always the September gales break down peach trees that are not headed low. Billy propped up the heavily laden branches with poles, and from time to time picked off all the speckled fruit he saw. Fortunately, the San José scale had not reached these trees and the fruit was healthy.

August proved very dry, and this fact hastened the ripening of the onions. That crop would have been more abundant and the onions themselves would have been larger and finer, had more

rain fallen. But when Billy saw that a good half of the tops were withered, he said it would not do to risk waiting any longer; the onions must be harvested at once.

"Get them out now, sell them for what they will bring, and then sow turnips; that is our best course," he declared. "If we let them stand much longer those that have already matured will sprout again and we shall have another field of scallions."

So Jack and his father dug the onions. The long windrows were allowed to lie for two or three days in the sun, and then were carried off the field in baskets and thoroughly dried on the hotbed sash before being sorted, measured, and sacked for market. Meanwhile Jack and Mr. Herron forked over the big patch again, Billy bought some turnip seed, and they sowed it broadcast.

"We'll get a few bushels of matured turnips, unless frost comes early; and every little helps," quoth Billy.

As for the onions, they sent 100 bushel of first quality white onions to the commission merchant in town and 100 bushel of red and 50 bushel of yellow onions. The merchant lent them the bags, and after the transportation charges and his commission were paid, the white onions netted the Herrons 85 cents a bushel, and the red and yellow onions 50 cents. These were extremely low prices, for both the merchant and the railroad company took advantage of their need. However, Billy and Jack were vastly encouraged. The sum cleared was \$160, and to that they added \$67.50 for scallions, sold some second quality onions for \$12 more, and saved beside enough for their own use for the Winter, and a bushel and a half of "button" onions for sets for the next season. When the check for the onions came in the three young people held a jollification. They crowed delightedly over the sum of their income thus far as set forth in Billy's ledger, and as it interested them so much, perhaps a recapitulation of it may interest the reader:

For clearing out cellars, etc.....	\$60.00
10 days' work for Sowersby.....	7.50
600 fence posts.....	30.00
Tomato and summer caggabe plants..	46.00

16 broilers.....	8.17
Tomatoes and other vegetables.....	14.30
Small fruits.....	11.10
Onions	239.50 \$416.57

Beside this, their table for two months had been almost wholly supplied from the garden. A piece of meat, or some fish, twice a week, and their dry groceries, were all that they had been obliged to buy. Of course, up to the time they received the check for the onions, they had barely paid expenses with what money had come in; and the household and its six members needed many things. They could have spent the entire check in needed articles, without buying a single luxury; but as they had got along so far with little, it was voted to wait until Fall, at least, before making any heavy expenditures. A hundred dollars was put into the village bank in Billy's name.

Then the handsome private carriage stopped at the gateway of Darnell Villa again. Pearl Mary screamed, dropped the dish-cloth, and ran out of the house, for she had seen Mr. Van Coe, and another man, getting out of the vehicle. Her anxiety led her to approach within earshot of the two gentlemen, and she heard the pompous man say:

"I've seen Darnell's plans. The house doesn't suit me and my daughter; but the lay-out of the cellar is all right. . . . Huh? Hullo, Sissy! what do you want?"

He had turned and found Pearl Mary almost at his elbow. The girl's anxiety broke down her timidity, and she cried: "Oh, sir! have you bought this place?"

"What's that to you?" returned the man, disagreeably. "But I *have*. And I had to take it with the encumbrance of you squatters on it until the end of the year—that's because of Mendon's quixotic foolishness. Oh, I shall stick to my bond; but on New Year's day off you go! Make no mistake about that, Miss."

The very harshness of Van Coe helped the girl to restrain her tears. Perhaps she had worried in secret over the threatened catastrophe for so long that there was some measure of relief to her mind and heart, now that the blow had really fallen. She knew she could obtain no satisfaction from Mr. Van Coe; indeed,

she could not talk with him at all. And what was there to be said? He had bought the place and must suffer the encumbrance of the Herrons on it for some months, and was not likely to feel kindly disposed toward them. All they had done for their own improvement at Rack and Ruin Villa must go for naught. They had had their trouble for their pains!

These were Pearl Mary's thoughts; her attitude was one of serious hopelessness when she slowly sought the two boys and told them the news. After all, she was forced to break it to them abruptly; there was no time now to prepare them for the blow which she had been expecting for weeks.

"Mr. Mendon's sold the place and we're going to be turned out the first of the year. Whatever shall we do, boys?" she demanded.

Both of them stared at her for a moment without speaking; even Billy was stricken dumb, and it was Jack who first expressed his feelings. He flung down the hoe he was using and by so doing broke off a thrifty cabbage-plant in the row, while he exclaimed:

"What's the use for *us* to try to do anything? We're fated to be followed by bad luck. We no more get ahead a foot when we slip back a yard!"

Billy had been on his knees; he did not rise at first, but looked up at his brother and Pearl Mary, and a little smile began to wrinkle his eyes. "And so, in addition to this that Mary has told us, Jack must destroy a perfectly good cabbage! That's at least five cents thrown away, Jackie; I'm surprised at you!"

"Oh, thunder, Billy! this is nothing to joke about," growled the big fellow. "Don't you hear what Mary says? We're turned out! I might have expected it. It was too good to last."

Even Pearl Mary herself was vexed with Billy for apparently making light of the situation, and when he saw her grave face and how Jack was looking at him, too, Billy became instantly serious. He sat back upon his haunches and demanded:

"Will you tell me what earthly good it will do for us to cry about it?"

"But see what we've done here!" cried Jack. "It's all gone for nothing."

"That is childish," declared his brother, sternly.

"I think Mr. Mendon is just mean!" said Pearl Mary.

"And *you* are ungrateful," was Billy's comment. "Come! to paraphrase some famous general, all is not lost while honor remains; and in our case all is not lost while hope remains. And we can still have oceans of hope!"

"Aw, Billy——" began Jack, in disgust.

"Hold on!" returned his brother. "I admit the set-back. But we have lost little here. It has been a start for us. Everything we have done has been self-educated at least, if nothing more. Don't repine. Mr. Mendon, it seems, has fixed it for us so that we are not turned out immediately. We will get the whole of our harvest, and between this and New Year's there will certainly be time for us to find some place that we can get on more certain terms than we obtained Rack and Ruin Villa. . . . I wouldn't destroy any more cabbages, Jack. We'll be here long enough to see them head up, at least," and his laugh as he finally scrambled to his feet was as cheery as ever.

"Now, I'll drop everything and go to town. I'll see Mr. Mendon first and make sure just what our rights are in the premises. When we know quite where we stand we shall be better able to plan for the future."

They let him go, ashamed at their own railings at Fortune. Yet neither Jack nor Pearl Mary were so constituted that they could ignore trouble as Billy seemed to do. They could not successfully hide the fact that they were disturbed from Granny and Aunt Nannie; and even Mr. Herron noticed their changed looks and reflected them in some measure—although Jack and the girl did not reveal the nature of the set-back to their fortunes. They waited with feverish impatience for Billy's return from town.

The supper hour lacked his cheerful presence. The evening dragged on and still he did not come. It was a lovely night and the whole family had been in the habit of late of sitting out before the little cottage, sometimes until ten o'clock, enjoying to the full "the cool of the day." Billy's stories and jokes kept them all amused; to-night there were long silences, Granny nodded in her low rocker, and Jack left the group altogether and paced the

driveway alone, his nervousness increasing as his brother's return was delayed.

Pearl Mary stole down to him at last and walked with him as the long moments dragged by. They scarcely spoke to each other; only a word or two now and then in a whisper about Billy's delay, or about the new difficulties that had been raised by their discovery of the change which threatened. Jack did not dare offer her his arm, but there was something sacred to the big fellow in the mere presence of Pearl Mary beside him there!

There was a moon, and its faint light revealed to him, now and then as they passed out from under the shadow of the trees, the girl's face in profile. There was a delicacy of feature and a sweetness in the expression of Pearl Mary's countenance that would have charmed an ordinary observer; on Jack they made an almost overpowering impression. His gaze remained fastened upon the unconscious girl; his breath half stifled him as he drew it; his boyish heart was filled with that worship of the object loved which is an attribute only of youth and the unspoiled!

And yet his tongue was tied; he clenched his hands at his sides and walked within touch of her, his desire unspoken, his whole soul afire. Surely Billy's love for her could be no greater than his own; yet he loved his brother, too. In honor he could do nothing—say nothing—that would seem disloyal. Billy's better right to the girl's affections Jack never for a moment doubted; nor did the big fellow suspect that Pearl Mary's heart was not already fixed upon he whom she had called "the good angel of their bad luck." How could she fail to choose Billy—not only in preference to *him*, but to any other fellow?

Suddenly, in a patch of moonlight some rods down the road, the limping figure of he whom they waited for appeared. Pearl Mary uttered a joyful cry and fluttered out of the gateway to meet him. But Jack stood beside the granite post, and fought down his passion that he might greet his brother calmly.

Billy and the girl came into the grounds and Jack put up the chains in silence. "Wait here," commanded Pearl Mary. "We must not go up to the house until you tell us all about it."

"Is it true?" was Jack's direct question.

"Now, now!" said Billy, casting himself upon the springy sod with a sigh of weariness. It had been a hot day in town and that, together with what he had to tell them, had "taken the tuck out of him." "It is *partly* true——"

Jack interrupted with a somewhat bitter laugh. "Dear, dear! This is another rift in the cloud. Billy always sees hope ahead. I believe it's as bad as can be!"

"It isn't!" denied Billy, with some relief. "I *do* see a rift in the cloud. And more than that. There is a great chance offered us. Mr. Mendon has not sold the whole place. This Mr. Van Coe has bought only 28 acres of the Darnell farm. That leaves more than 20 acres on Mr. Mendon's hands."

"What part?" gasped Pearl Mary.

"Of course, Van Coe has purchased the front estate—all this about here," and he waved his stick, his gesture taking in the lawns, their garden, and the immediate neighborhood.

"But we lose our home?"

"Unfortunately, we do," admitted Billy.

"What did I tell you?" muttered Jack.

"But wait till I tell you what Mr. Mendon says," urged his brother. "These twenty-odd acres left are, of course, up in the mountain—all the back part of the farm. There is a strip running parallel to, and bordering on, the old Northfield road. The projected trolley to Bathurstport will be laid on that pike within the next ten years—that's sure. Mr. Mendon proposes to hold that strip—say, two hundred feet deep—for a rise in value. That will leave about 16 acres. And those 16 acres, children, *he gives us a chance to buy!*"

"Buy!" shouted Jack.

"However can we buy 16 acres of land, Billy?" demanded Pearl Mary. "We wouldn't dare use the money in the bank to pay down on it. How could we live this Winter if we did?"

"Listen to me," said the cripple, seriously. "Remember that I have given Mr. Mendon no answer. He means kindly by us, that is sure."

"It's waste ground!" declared Jack, gloomily. "He'd never sell it in the world."

"Don't say that, Jack. Let us look at the proposition from all sides. In the first place, I will tell you the particulars of his offer. Then we can discuss it afterward. Call it 16 acres clear. He values it at \$1,600—a hundred dollars an acre. And we are not to pay a cent down, saving the legal dollar to bind the bargain. We are to have five years in which to pay \$1,000 and the remaining \$600 he will carry on mortgage as long as we wish. He charges no interest on the thousand."

"He will give us the posts Jack has cut for the fencing and furnish all the wire if we will do the work, stretching the wire between Mr. Van Coe's, Mr. Short's, Sowersbys', the Northfield road strip, and our land——"

"Hear him!" groaned Jack. "He speaks already of 'our land'! "

Billy actually blushed and hung his head; but Pearl Mary instantly took up the cudgels for him. "Why, I think it's *fine*—if we can do it," she declared.

"Glad you put in that *If*," said the big fellow, bitterly. "Do you two realize what it means? In the first place, the back of this farm is mostly rocks and trees. It would take years to clear it all, and then some of the slopes are so steep that the rains would wash the crops out of the ground. It's only the roots of the trees and brush up there that keep the whole surface of the mountain-side from washing down into the valley. And how'll we build a house? Even if we have five years to pay the first thousand dollars—Hold on! it will be more than that. We've got to pay interest on \$600 all that time, too, haven't we, Billy?"

"Yes," admitted the cripple.

"That's \$36 every year, then; \$1180 to pay to Mendon in five years—and even then we won't have cleared the place. We'll still owe \$600 on it, and that's every cent it's worth, I shouldn't wonder," he added, gloomily.

"How can you say so, Jack?" cried Billy, finally stung to indignation. "I'm not so foolish as to want to saddle this family with a debt and a useless piece of land. There are a lot of things to think of. There is almost timber enough on the place to pay the \$600 mortgage. You remember the fine logs that are lying up

there in the cove—the ones Sowersby cut? There's enough of them to build a mighty nice house."

"A log cabin!" ejaculated Jack.

"A fine, warm, and well built bungalo," returned Billy. "Mr. Mendon showed me the plans of one, and told me how it can be built at a small cost. You and father can square the timbers and all the help we'll have to hire will be to raise the walls. We can clear a good many roots and stumps out of that cove this winter. The soil is the finest I ever saw. Talk about this soil down here being rich—why, that in the cove is far superior to it! And the water-power, you haven't taken that into consideration. We could set up a portable mill there on the creek bank and saw all the timber we could cut, into planks and shingles."

"And how would you get it out to market?" cried Jack. "Where's your road?"

"Darnell owned a right of way through Sowersby's place—that old wood road. Mr. Mendon says that right will belong to us; and Mr. Mendon himself will give us a right of way out on to the Northfield Pike. Jack, Jack! whether we can do this thing, or not, *it's a great chance!* Think what we have accomplished since last Winter. If we have got on our feet where we had merely squatters' rights, how much better should we do when we know we're working to *own* our home? Think of it! The Herrons have a chance to be independent again——"

His voice broke and his tears choked him. Pearl Mary threw her arms about his neck and through her own tears cried to Jack: "Jackie, I'm convinced! I don't want any more discussion. Why should we fear? Who's been the good angel of our bad luck right along? Billy knows; he always *does* know."

Jack figuratively and actually threw up his hands. "I haven't anything more to say," he admitted. "It's a big contract, but if Billy says we can do it, I'm willing to hump myself all I know! I'm not afraid of the work. And I admit that that hollow up there on the mountainside is a fine bit of ground. There's more than two acres of it. And there are other tillable spots."

"But you're not particularly enthusiastic about it," Billy gurgled. "There! I'm a chump! I want to sleep over it. Mr. Mendon talked so persuasively to me that perhaps I've been convinced against what should be my better judgment. Let's wait before we decide."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRANSPLANTING.

Waiting did not change Billy Herron's own opinion of the plan for the family's future which Mr. Mendon's kindness had made possible. The idea had grown out of Billy's own groping, however, for a way out of the difficulty. He had gone to his friend and former employer merely to learn the particulars about the sale of the Darnell place; he had not dreamed that only a part of the farm had been sold, and that the part which remained on Mr. Mendon's hands could, by any possible arrangement, offer even a better opportunity to himself and his brother, than had Rack and Ruin Villa.

The result of a long conversation with the real estate man had been the offer Billy reported on his home coming. And further discussion and a closer scrutiny of the plan only served to convince him of the advisability of the family's grasping this opportunity to once more own a home, including land that, he believed, could be made to support them all, in time, in comfort. Pearl Mary was willing to follow his lead blindly, from the start; and Jack, after he had digested the new idea, and had milled it over in his mind sufficiently, saw it in the same way, too; he even grew enthusiastic about it.

The family had been forced to accept the refuge of Rack and Ruin Villa in the first place. They had some choice in the present circumstances; but was this not a "leading," too? Billy firmly believed it was and as Jack's pessimism evaporated he began to see the outlook in that light. . . . Yet, like strong swimmers preparing for a dive into deep waters, they hesitated and breathed deeply before going down!

The first work was the building of the boundary fences, and Jack and his father went at it at once, for Billy and Pearl Mary could attend to the crops still remaining in the garden. And there was no little work to fill in their time, as late as it was in

the season. It is true that they had gotten the best of the weeds, the onions were out of the way, and the turnips had appeared and were growing vigorously. But they were at the best of the tomato crop, and the cabbage-worm was abroad in the land and would have spoiled their Winter supply of that succulent vegetable had not the plants been continually watched. At first, while they were small, a little lime dusted on the leaves was sufficient to keep down the ravages of the pests; but later white hellebore, in solution, applied every morning, was their only salvation.

Billy found that the tomato-plants tied to their stakes grew much taller than he expected, and some were so heavy with fruit that the posts broke and had to be reinforced with other stakes driven down beside the weakly ones, and the two tied together. He had started tying the plants up with common white string; but soon learned that raffia was cheaper and better. And he likewise evolved the idea that it would be better to drive a row of heavier posts in the ground, having them stand at least eight feet high, and fasten five strands of wire along the posts, to which the tomato plants could be tied even easier than to the stakes. But this idea was for the next season.

"I will not be satisfied," he told Pearl Mary, "until I can see a dollar of profit from every tomato plant. That I believe can be done by securing seed of some solid "beefsteak" variety such as these, that not only make a handsome appearance, but are really the best in flavor. A smooth, medium-sized fruit, of a dark red color, sells the best; the mammoth varieties are apt to be ugly in shape. Saving at the few first-class fruit stores in town you seldom see perfectly ripened tomatoes, and those that are not badly cracked. The ordinary tomato grower seems to pay little attention to the picking and marketing of his fruit; and really, that is the end of the business that needs the most careful attention."

Billy had secured the best results by following this rule: as soon as the tomato began to color—as soon as there were any streaks or blotches of pink upon it—the fruit was picked. But picking tomatoes half green and sending them off to market in bushel crates did not satisfy him, as we have seen. He handled the fruit as carefully as he did the peaches when they were ripe.

As the tomatoes were brought in daily from the vines, he placed them in shallow boxes—like the nurserymen's "flats"—side by side and the stem-end down, and piled the boxes upon one another, ripening the fruit in the dark. Under this treatment the tomatoes ripened evenly and they could be culled over and packed into baskets in the cool cellar much better than out-of-doors. He even determined that, the next season, he would try to get baskets of his own, stenciled with name and address, and wrap each tomato in a stamped tissue wrapper, like oranges or hothouse tomatoes. In selling to high-class fruiterers such a method would pay.

Within the week Billy, with the full agreement of the family, signed the necessary papers with Mr. Mendon, and 16 acres and some odd rods of the hillside farm became nominally the property of the Herrons. The necessary payments would amount to but \$236 yearly for five years; and only the interest money—\$36—was to be paid at any specified time. It was a very irregular business arrangement, but it was not an unfair one on both sides. The Herrons certainly could have bought the place on no other terms; but Mr. Mendon, after selling the front of the estate, and retaining the lots bordering on the Northfield pike, would have had great difficulty in disposing of the acres that Billy and Jack Herron proposed to work in a way to win a living—and something more—for the family!

While Jack and his father were building the line fence Billy and Pearl Mary climbed the mountain-side to choose the situation for the bungalow which was to shelter them when they went on to their own land at New Year's. Mr. Mendon had furnished them with the working plans of a modern house of the bungalow description, and when Pearl Mary understood it, she cried:

"Why! it will be just as nice as a flat—with the rooms all on one floor. And isn't it artistic!"

"It can be made artistic," Billy replied. "But let us consider comfort and utility first."

The building was to be forty feet long and thirty broad, and the plan called for a wide, roofed porch, upheld by log pillars with the bark on, all around the house. They did not expect to build

the porch this winter; but in time it could be added and even screened, with the south front enclosed in glass, if they could ever afford it, for a winter "sun-parlor." Inside, the structure was divided into three rooms only, with an unpartitioned loft for storage and sleeping quarters for the boys. The main thought about the whole building was to have a warm and habitable house that would resist wind and weather, and which could be improved, and added to, as their means and needs increased.

Pearl Mary selected the site of the log-house. It was to face the south and was built well up on the northern slope of that cove in which Jack had unwittingly helped the Sowersbys rob Mr. Mendon of some of the best timber on the place. The logs which had been left by the mauraunders would come in handy now for the building of the bungalow.

Behind the site of the house the hill shielded it from the north winds. The boys had brick enough saved from the wreck of the old Darnell Villa chimneys to build piers on which the sills of the building were to be laid, for it was planned to lay the heavy flooring at least two feet from the ground. Had they laid the first logs on the ground, in time the timbers would rot and the whole structure sag.

The natural slope of the ground assured good drainage. At first they could not think of digging a cellar; but that could be done after the house was built. Before even Billy allowed Pearl Mary to select the site for the log house, he looked over the ground for a water supply. The spring in the hollow was very good water and was not far away; but Billy looked ahead, and he knew that the household should depend upon a different supply from that. He searched the higher ground, in the wood above the site of the bungalow, and found, not many yards away, a damp and mossy little hollow that promised a spring near the surface.

He called Jack, and they dug some few feet, finding the water bubbling under the spade—and its quality was good. Billy had some broken rock brought, and walled up the spring like a shallow well. It did not rise high enough to run off, but there was plainly sufficient seepage through the soil to keep the pool fresh.

"An open pool from which to obtain drinking water is not safe," admitted Billy. "But it will serve us for the Winter. To drive a well would cost more than we can afford, and it is not what I want, either. When we can—perhaps before next Spring—Jack and I will dig this spring deeper, and lay pipes from it to the house, where you can have a tap."

"And we'll have a bathroom!" cried Pearl Mary, in delight.

Billy chuckled. "Of course. Will you have a plunge, or a shower bath? I guess we'll have to get these 'modern improvements' slowly, Sis. . . . But we can have running water, I believe, at a small cost; this spring can be tightly covered, and it never runs dry, I'll be bound!"

Mr. Short, who of course had quickly heard that the Herrons were to lose their present home, sauntered over to mourn with Billy over their hard luck, only to find the whole family full of their new plans and seemingly joyfully facing the change.

"I never see such folks as you be, Billy," he complained. "What's the use of anybody commiseratin' with ye? Ye don't know when ye're licked! Ye're up and at it ag'in as soon's ye're knocked down."

"I don't believe in lying there and 'taking the count' from Fate," retorted Billy. "Do you know anything about building a log house, 'Lias?"

"I was born in one," declared Mr. Short, proudly. "And I helped build two or three for neighbors when I was a boy. They was mostly for smoke houses; but the method is the same."

"You're the man I want, then," said Billy, and he promptly engaged Mr. Short to help them with his team of horses to erect the bungalow. This was the first debt Billy had contracted since they came to Rack and Ruin Villa; but he knew that he could not pay cash for Mr. Short's services, and the kind-hearted neighbor was willing to wait a year for payment, or perhaps Jack could work out some of the debt, as the big fellow might be spared from their own activities.

Cash had to be paid for all the millwork for the new house, and this was no inconsiderable sum, for doors, window-frames, and sash, as well as flooring, shingles, and matched pine for the

inside partitions, had to be purchased. In time Billy hoped to ceil the entire interior of the bungalow, but at first—for this winter, at least—they must be contented to merely cover the rough walls with sheets of building-paper. These expenses made an awful hole in their little hoard in the bank; but during the Fall, and subsequent to the recapitulation of their means as set forth in a former chapter, the proceeds from the sale of vegetables and other produce continued encouraging.

Aside from the vegetables they used on their own table, they disposed of more than twenty dollars' worth of tomatoes and other fruits that Fall. And when the peaches were ripe Granny and Aunt Nannie preserved 18 dozen quart jars of that delicious fruit. Not for their own use; they could only afford to keep a few jars for special occasions. Billy bought the jars and sugar at wholesale and they sold 16 dozen jars of fruit to a certain first-class grocer in the city at a quarter of a dollar a can, the profit being 14 cents on each jar. And in November they sold 350 bushel of turnips, clearing 35 cents a bushel. They were then able to figure their actual income for the year, and made it in the neighborhood of \$575.

"Not a plutocratic sum," said Billy. "But it's a beginning. We've done well. And beside what we've made, think of what we have all learned, to help us in the years to come. True, we had no serious setbacks; but I do not think we can ever have a worse year than this. Our housekeeping need not cost us more than \$300 for the year if we live as frugally as we have for these past eight months. And every penny we can spare from our living, and from what we have to pay on the farm, should go for improvements and in increasing Pearl Mary's flock."

Billy banked heavily on the chickens. Already the pullets were laying—every one of them. He sent away and purchased a finely bred rooster, a year old, for four dollars and a half. When some of Mr. Short's old hens began to be broody again about the first of December, Pearl Mary borrowed three and they set them in the cellar on eggs from their own flock. The girl watched over these brooding hens quite as carefully as she had in the spring, despite the fact that she had so many other duties now. The

fences were all built long before the first snow-squall, and at odd times Billy and Jack had built a rough, but warm, shanty on the new place to house the chicks in when they should be hatched. When it came time to move they proposed taking their henhouse right along for the grown flock. The poultry would not have to be fenced in until Spring.

Mr. Short had carted the brick to the site of the new house some time before, and Billy laid the piers himself. It was at this time that the Herrons had their first unpleasantness with a neighbor—and Billy had more than half expected it.

Mr. Mendon had had the line between the Darnell farm and Sowersby's place "run" by a surveyor before Jack and his father began setting the posts and stringing the wire of the new fence. The red-headed Sowersby had looked on sourly while the job was being done, but had not ventured to accost Jack. The latter, perhaps, looked dangerous.

The old woodpath that joined the Medway road entered the Herrons' property near the point where Sowersbys', Van Coe's and the Herrons' places adjoined each other. Here Jack, under instructions from Mr. Mendon, had built a stout gate, which they kept fastened with a padlock. When Short drove up from the main road with the first load of brick, old man Sowersby and his son hastened from their barn, which was visible from the wood-road, and stopped the cart before it reached the gateway leading into the Herron property.

"Say, you know better than to drive onto private property, 'Lias," said Sowersby. "I aint goin' to let this lane be used like a public highway, and you kin turn around and drive back."

"But how'll these boys git on to their place, and off'n it ag'in, Sowersby, if you don't 'low 'em right of way through here?" queried Short, mildly.

"That aint nothin' to me," declared the man. "I got enough of that Herron gang, and I won't have one of 'em step foot on my place—"

Billy just then swung open the new gate and stepped through. "Drive right in, 'Lias," he said. "I'll attend to Mr. Sowersby."

Short, chuckling, clucked to his horses and the Sowersbys

had to step aside to save themselves from being run over.

" You mis'rable, game-legged little rooster!" bawled the elder Sowersby. " I'll have you up before the court for this."

" Any time you like," said Billy, quietly. " But I have seen and read the old deeds, and I can prove that your grandfather was paid for the right of way through this lane by the former owner of my land. Not only that, but Mr. Mendon told me to say to you that the moment you try to take any legal steps to have this road closed, he will sue you in the civil courts for the value of the timber you cut on his land, and will likewise bring criminal proceedings against you, too, on the same count. You would better let us alone, Mr. Sowersby; we will be very good neighbors, I have no doubt, as long as you do not interfere with our rights."

" What did I tell you, dad?" whined the red-headed youth, tugging at his father's sleeve. " I knowed them Herrons would be bad luck to us from the beginnin'. You'd never oughter let that Jack work for ye in the first place—an' ye paid him cash, too!"

" You still losin' sleep over that seven-fifty, Bub?" growled Sowersby, as he turned away, balked for the moment. Although the farmer was quite as sharp and dishonest as his son, he could not match Bub in miserliness.

For the time the Sowersbys had to be content to see Short cart both the bricks and the lumber from the mill, for the bungalow. But the actual work of raising the walls of the structure was postponed until not only the ground froze, but until sufficient snow fell to make drawing the logs easy. Jack had learned to swing an ax very skillfully, and his knowledge of carpenter's tools came into play, too! While they waited for Jack Frost, he selected, prepared, and numbered the logs for the walls.

If they had been busy before, the young Herrons certainly doubled their exertions now. Living out-of-doors for nearly eight months had made of Pearl Mary a sturdy, athletic girl. She could breathe deeply now; there was a rosy color in her round cheek instead of the hectic flush that had once troubled Billy not a little to observe. She could walk, or run, and handle a

hoe and rake with any ordinary boy. Under the gentle curves of her womanly, healthy figure was muscle and sinew trained to endure fatigue. And she grew handsomer every day! At least, so the boys secretly thought.

Mr. Herron's interest in the new home building was keener than in anything they had yet undertaken. Billy thought that, now and then, his father showed a better understanding of what went on about him than he had since losing both his business and the control of his mind. He did not again display the intelligence which Billy had seen in his look and manner on the occasion when the man with the roan mustache had stopped at the house; but his general advancement was noticeable.

In Billy's own case the improvement brought about by an active, out-of-door life could not be doubted. His stick was usually within reach while he was at work; but frequently he would not use it for half an hour at a time. The withered limb was by no means the physical drag it had once been upon him. His muscles and bones never ached the way they had when first the family had come to Rack and Ruin Villa. He realized that he was developing physically as well as mentally; there was a flicker of hope being fanned to life in Billy Herron's soul—he believed that he might yet be a man like other men, instead of remaining always handicapped by a crippled limb!

So, hope was big in all their hearts. Poverty and hard work could not make them fear the future, for they were familiar with both and knew that they were merely obstacles to be overcome—not to balk their desires! A year had almost elapsed since that night when, as it had seemed to Billy and his brother, and Pearl Mary, they were "at the end of all things." In truth, they had been at the beginning of a broader and better existence. Therefore, they did not now shrink from this other and greater change which faced them; they had conquered apparent "bad luck" once, and could conquer it again!

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE GRIP OF THE GALE.

The cove on the hillside where the bungalow was being built was not the only scene of activity in the neighborhood during these weeks. In November the building materials began to arrive for the new Van Coe house and the stable, to be built on the foundations already standing, and soon carpenters were at work upon both structures, so as to get them covered in before the Winter storms made outside work impossible.

Miss Van Coe, who was one of those unfortunate creatures without vigorous health and with very few interests in life, drove over frequently and really put herself out to be friendly with Pearl Mary.

"I'm awfully sorry, don't you know, that our buying the place has made you lose that dear little cottage. But, of course, our gardener will have to occupy it. And Mr. Mendon says your brother has saved the fruit for us, and that the trees and garden really would have been ruined if he had not given them such good care this season. Father will let me do just as I like about those things; he always lets me have my own way," she added. "And I understand that there are some things in the garden—berry bushes, and rhubarb plants, and strawberry runners, that you could take up and remove to your new place just as well as not. And, if it is so, I'd like to have you help yourselves."

It was impossible to resist such open-handedness, despite the fact that Pearl Mary had taken such a dislike to the pompous Mr. Van Coe. And Billy was quick to appreciate the young woman's kindness and to take advantage of it, too. He managed to scratch over a strip of soil near the site of the bungalow, where he hoped next year to have their kitchen garden, and into this rich mold he transplanted red and black raspberry and blackberry canes, and dewberry and strawberry vines in sufficient

quantities to yield fruit for their own table. He took slips from the gooseberry and currant bushes, too, and then set a woven brush fence around the new patch up on the hillside to keep out the four-footed marauders, of which there were plenty in the wood. They knew, too, that their poultry would be in serious danger from foxes, skunks and other vermin, and that they must take precautions accordingly.

Billy might have fretted some because he could do so little toward the actual work of putting up the walls of the bungalow when that was begun, had it not been that he had started a new and important industry earlier in the fall. Indeed, almost as soon as they decided to purchase this practically uncleared farm, Billy's inventive mind had wrestled with the most important problem that would face them in the new venture. How could they successfully and cheaply clear a sufficiently large piece of tillable land this Winter to produce a living for the family in the next year?

The Sowersbys had cut most of the large timber in the cove; to cut down and burn the rubbish that remained would be a comparatively small matter. The logs that already cumbered the ground would mostly be utilized in the building of the bungalow. But the stumps remained.

The stumps, then, constituted Billy's problem, and he grappled with that problem in his usual style—with a measure of dogged perseverance well seasoned by information gathered from his broad reading. He could not afford to hire a stump-puller and a gang to clear the land. The patch they had grubbed over and in which they had set the small fruit plants and sowed some Winter spinach seed, was only a few yards square. There was more than two and a half acres, roughly estimated, in that cove and Billy and Jack desired to plant every inch of it if possible in the Spring.

With the first load of lumber from the mill, Mr. Short had likewise carted to the spot a barrel of the cheaper grade of kerosene, which Billy bought in the village. He had likewise purchased some coarse gunpowder and a two-inch auger. As he had time, he bored holes in the bigger stumps (sometimes

half a dozen holes in one stump), pouring in a little powder and filling the holes with kerosene. Soft pine plugs that he whittled out evenings after the more arduous work of the day, stoppered these holes tightly; and during the Fall and early Winter he went over the same stumps again and again, pouring more kerosene into the holes as the fibrous wood soaked it down, until dozens of them were prepared for an event that was destined to astonish his brother and amaze the rest of the family.

From time to time their possessions were brought up from the place which now belonged to Mr. Van Coe in 'Lias Short's cart. The hotbed sash and frames, their Winter's supply of vegetables as fast as they were harvested, their tools, and even Pearl Mary's chickens. About the middle of December the eggs the girl had set were hatched out; but from the forty-five eggs only twenty-one chicks broke the shell, and two of those died when Jack carried the brood up to the new place. Billy had purchased a small oil heater with which to keep the hen-house warm in severe weather, and the chicks did very well when once established in their new home; but the young poultry keepers had learned a lesson.

Pullet eggs are seldom fertile, and chicks hatched from them are not strong and healthy. A hen two years old lays the most fertile eggs, and Billy declared that, no matter how short of money they were, when Pearl Mary had hens that wanted to set again, he would somehow manage to buy well-bred eggs, as they had in the first instance; at least, until their own stock was old enough to furnish first-class eggs.

The log bungalow was finished at last—and not many days before Christmas. Its cost had figured much higher than they had at first hoped. Billy had been forced to draw every penny from the bank, and all that they had taken in from the sale of produce during the Fall was eaten up, as well. The little Aunt Nannie made from her fancy-work (she had clung to this work all these months) was now their only income. They had some Winter vegetables carefully stored in the loft of the bungalow, and in a brush-covered mound in the open; but they had not dared

buy a pound of butcher's meat for two weeks, and Billy would not get in debt at the grocery store in the village.

The sum they owed 'Lias Short worried Billy enough, without launching out in the sea of debt that tempted them. Altogether they owed Short, for his own work and the use of his team, nearly a hundred dollars! That included the transporting of their household goods from Rack and Ruin Villa to the new home, just two days before Christmas.

And they were proud of the house. Their enthusiasm over its solid comforts and the thought that it was their very own, could not be quenched by the fact that its building had fairly bankrupted them. The big living-room on that first evening was a veritable joy. With some art Billy had planned an enormous stone fireplace, with a brick chimney, which half filled the outer end of the room. During the Summer he had purchased a blue-flame oil stove, and they expected to use that in the new house to cook on, for their old cookstove was sadly "burned out." It had not originally been built to burn wood, and they could not afford coal at Rack and Ruin Villa. The old cookstove, therefore, was relegated to a lean-to the boys had knocked up near the henhouse, in which they hoped to work during the inclement weather.

The heap of logs and dry wood in the fireplace, when it was touched off and got to burning, radiated a pleasant glow through the big room, and dispelled the chill in the bedrooms and in the loft, as well. Of course, an open fire broils one's face while one's back freezes; but, as Pearl Mary said, "it is awful comfy to look it!" They managed to be very comfortable in the new house that first night, although the weather had been steadily growing colder for a week and the thermometer was well down below freezing.

There had been several light snow falls already. The Winter had started in "in the old-fashioned way," Granny said. She told them that first evening of occasions she remembered when her girlhood's home had been snowbound, with snow several feet deep on the level, and the drifts so high that they had to be tunneled for the men folk to get from the house to the barns.

It was fine to hear about; but when the clouds that gathered all the next day began to discharge their burden of great snow-flakes, and the falling mass grew thicker and heavier as Christmas Eve approached, even the younger members of the Herron family felt some anxiety.

Pearl Mary's anxiety, however, included the chicks. She plowed out through the drifts just at dusk to make sure that the oil heater was filled, and that the nineteen little yellow fellows were snug for the night. How the wind wailed through the trees on the mountain above the bungalow! And how it fell upon her like a rough boy, and buffeted her, and dragged her skirts about, and finally threw her bodily into a soft drift by the henhouse door, out of which she extricated herself with no little difficulty!

And this was when she went out to the henhouse. Jack had not been at home when she ventured forth, or he would not have heard of her doing this. She did not know where Jack was, and had refused to allow Billy to attend to the chickens, for he had been dragging in firewood all the afternoon and had actually lain down before the roaring fire on the heart in exhaustion.

She got into the henhouse, which was divided in two parts by a screen of inch-mesh wire, so that the little chicks could not run in under the henroosts. It was warm in the building, although the ventilation was good, for Billy had insisted on leaving screened openings under the eaves on the south and west sides. Pearl Mary was sure that it would be very much colder before morning, and she set down the lantern and cleaned and carefully filled the big tank of the heater, lighting it finally and sitting by it until all danger of its smoking, or the flame drawing up too high, was past. She knew the lamp would burn at least twelve hours.

She was rested and warm herself by this time, and buttoning her father's old coat about her, and mittening her hands again, she picked up the lantern and essayed to open the door. It opened outward, of course, but when she unlatched it, there seemed to be something braced against it on the outside, and she could scarcely stir it!

She set down her lantern, pushed hard against the door with both hands, and suddenly realized that, during the hour she had spent here, the snow had been heaped in a mighty drift against the door. She could scarcely open it two inches, and through this aperture saw nothing but the white wall. The drift was higher than the door, and from the steady "swish, swish" of the storm she believed that the bank must be gathering very, very swiftly, and that she was actually buried under the drifts.

She laughed at first. It seemed so utterly ridiculous for a full grown human being (Pearl Mary considered herself *that*, of course, despite her size) to have fallen into such a plight. Snowbound in a henhouse! Her laughter really disturbed the hens, and Cap'n Jinks, the rooster. The ladies fluttered on their perches and the Cap'n uttered a single, raucous squawk.

"I shall disturb their beauty sleep," giggled Pearl Mary. "Won't the boys laugh at me for getting into such a plight! I suppose I'm safe enough here; I'd be safe all night if I had to stay. But my! I don't want chickens for bed-fellows," and she laughed again, but this time smothered the sound so as not to annoy the Cap'n, who was indeed a dignified bird.

She well knew that no storm would keep the boys from getting to her, and that very soon. Jack with his shovel would very quickly dig through the drifts and rescue her. But she might not have been so easy in her mind had she known that, while she was patiently waiting here, and Billy had actually fallen asleep on the floor before the open fire in the bungalow, Jack was fighting the gale—rather the blizzard, for such it had become since darkness settled upon the land—on his way home from the village.

The big fellow had told nobody where he was going when he left the house soon after noon. Billy believed that he was not far away, in a sheltered hemlock clump, where there was a heap of cured logs and tree limbs, left from the depredations of the Sowersbys on the timber the previous Winter. The Herrons had none too much seasoned wood to burn, and Jack had been very anxious to prepare a great heap of it against such occasions as this present one.

But Jack was fighting his way in the very teeth of the storm, and, husky and determined as he was, he often had to turn his back and "lean against the wind" to get his breath. The snow came so thick and fast that it seemed more like plowing through a drift over one's head than facing a veritable downfall of the flakes that are usually so soft and yielding.

The big fellow would certainly have been in danger of wandering from the way and perhaps spending the night under a drift, had the ascending road from the bridge which spanned the creek just above the village, not been through a deep cut for most of the way. The high banks on either hand assured Jack that he was still pursuing the right direction; and these banks continued almost to the boundary between Sowersbys' and the Van Coe place. Here the stone wall, and the bars shutting off the old woodroad that was the source of disagreement between the Sowersbys and the Herrons, aided Jack in finding the right path. He mounted the rough hillside, sometimes slumping into snow-filled hollows, in which he wallowed like a poor swimmer, while again he made a rod or two on ground that was almost bare, the wind having swept the fleecy covering from that spot to add to nearby drifts.

It was a fight all the way, however. He climbed over the padlocked gate at the bottom of the cove in which the bungalow stood and then, lo, a bright eye blinked at him from up the hill, and through all the thick haze of the driving snow. It was the light burning in the big living room at home—the cheeriest sight it seemed to Jack he had ever seen.

A warmth of feeling stole over him that chased away the frost that stung his body. There, where that light was, was everything the big fellow held dear in the world. Despite their poverty, and the hard times which they seemed just to be entering on, the Herrons were as close knit as any family in the land. Sacrifice and hard work sweetened their communication with each other. There was a depth of feeling between Jack and his brother that is seldom found in families. Otherwise there would have long since been a serious misunderstanding over Pearl Mary.

And Pearl Mary was there—there where the bright light shone through the window. Jack buffeted the storm now and had almost reached the house when he heard a sudden cry. It was off to the right—in the direction of the henhouse. Was it a cry for “help?” The idea seemed preposterous, yet the sound had rung so clear upon his ear that he was startled.

He dropped what he had been carrying beside the step and wrenched the portal open to stand a moment in the doorway, a veritable snowman.

“Oh, it’s Jack!” cried Aunt Nannie. “It is really Jack.”

“My dear! how providential you have come,” Granny said, her old voice shaking. “Billy——”

“What’s the matter with Billy? where is he?” demanded the big fellow, as his grandmother hesitated.

“He went out for her. They have not come back, and—and I am worried,” said the old lady.

“PEARL MARY!”

The words came from Jack in a shout. He turned and flung himself out into the storm. Aunt Nannie screamed after him and he caught her words:

“The henhouse, Jack! She went there, and Billy went to find her and bring her in!”

The drifts on the south side of the bungalow were not so great; but when Jack flung himself barehanded into those between the house and the shanty they had built for the hens, he realized for the first time how the snow had gathered on this partially sheltered side hill. He tore through them; but in places they were over his head, and he went through like a strong swimmer taking the breakers at the seashore! He reached the henhouse. He knew what it was because of the great mound it made; nothing but that was visible. The drifts had covered it all.

But he realized that the snow had been recently disturbed at this end. The door was right here somewhere. He went at the snow like a terrier digging at a muskrat hole, flinging the snow behind him, and finally getting hold of the doorknob. He dragged the door toward him for several inches. The oil

lamp illuminated the place, and the hens were disturbed. He saw that neither his brother nor Pearl Mary was here.

"They've gone! they've gone!" groaned the anxious young fellow. "They're lost!"

He forced the henhouse door shut and turned, with his back to the gale, and tried to straighten out his chaotic thoughts. One thing he saw at once. There was no light visible from this spot. The chimney end of the bungalow was toward him, and had he not been sure of the direction he might have easily missed the house, too. What had happened to Billy and the girl was easily understood.

They had started away from the henhouse and had missed their bearings. They had no lighted window to act as a beacon. How far had they got now? He raised his voice in a mighty shout; he knew that the sound must have been carried a long way down wind; but he was not surprised that he received no answer. In the teeth of the gale a steam whistle would scarcely have been heard half a hundred feet!

He stumbled away from the henhouse door. At the first step he was brought to a standstill. There was something under his feet that almost threw him. He stooped and recovered the shovel—where Billy must have dropped it after digging through the snow to release the girl. And where had they gone?

Jack knew it was useless shouting again. He allowed himself to be urged by the wind and the beating, drifting snow, entirely off the line that led directly to the house. So Billy and Pearl Mary must have been swept away. Oh! why had he not believed his own ears when he heard that cry for help as he approached the house door? And that was twenty minutes ago now! In this fearful storm much indeed might happen in twenty minutes. He opened his mouth to shout despairingly again; but a mass of snow was whisked into it, and he was almost knocked down and buried under a sudden heap of the stuff. A burdened tree-branch had broken above him and its cargo had landed, a miniature avalanche, on Jack's head and shoulders.

Suppose something like that—only a greater avalanche—had befallen his brother and Pearl Mary? Jack was racked by the

thought. Fear for himself he had none; he believed he could fight all night in the storm; but those two—so helpless under circumstances of this kind!

Again and again he shouted. Yet he believed the shouts were futile. He worked farther away from the house and down the hill. That was the direction of least resistance. He considered that Billy and the girl would have been swept quite helplessly down into the lower part of the cove.

And then suddenly a thought smote Jack Herron that turned him to the right about. Would Billy, who was so wise in other things, lose his head entirely in this storm and do the obvious thing?

It was not possible! His brother and his charge might have been swept away from the path to the house, at first; but very quickly Billy would have realized the wrong direction, and would have started *up* the hill, not *down!* Jack wheeled in his tracks, faced the rising landscape utterly unseen by him now, and making a horn of his two hands, cracked his voice shouting into the gale. Again and again he bellowed, putting the full force of his splendid lungs into the cry, meanwhile struggling back up the hillside, a foot or two at a time.

He passed the henhouse on his left hand. In a momentary break in the storm he recognized the mound of it. Plowing through the snow, sometimes hurling great shovels full of it aside as he came to an extra-sized drift, he finally climbed to a point some yards above the bungalow.

Then his foot became entangled in something that was not a root, or a fallen branch. He plunged upon hands and knees, and groped for it. It was the broken and twisted lantern. His brother and Pearl Mary had passed that way.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT.

Suddenly a flare of light started into being some rods away. The flames leaped higher and higher, and he saw that it must proceed from a small spruce tree, the inner, dry branches of which had been coaxed into a blaze. Jack ran, yelling again at the top of his voice.

"Steady!" Billy's voice came down the wind to him, seemingly as calm and unshaken as usual. "Don't run about bellowing in this storm that way, Jack. We have been expecting you. We're way off the trail, I fancy?"

Jack could not answer. He plunged on until he reached the spot where his brother and Pearl Mary stood in the growing glare of the burning tree.

"You're all right! you're all right!" gasped Jack, then.

"Quite, old man. But mighty glad to have you come and help us. We went about as far as we could, and I've been having the dickens of a time to start this blaze. You see, we lost the lantern."

"Such a storm!" said Pearl Mary. Then she seemed to understand something of the emotion displayed in Jack's pallid face. "Why, Jackie!" she cried. "You *were* worried, weren't you?"

"And why wouldn't I be?" demanded Jack, hoarsely. "I thought I had lost you, Mary."

"What! with Billy here?" and the girl laughed lightly.

The tone, the words, smote through the last layer of the big fellow's self-conceit. The two weaklings before him had been lost—yes; but Billy had confidence in himself, and Pearl Mary had every belief in Billy! His brother always knew what to do in an emergency. The setting afire of the spruce tree proved that he had not lost his self-possession, whereas Jack himself

had quite lost *his* head and had expended both time and effort uselessly.

"All right, Jack," said Billy, seeing that his brother was troubled. "Wait until we're sure this fire won't spread—the green needles won't burn, you know—and then we'll hike for home. Are you sure you can make it? You see, I lost my bearings entirely."

"I know the way," said Jack, firmly.

And when they were ready to start he led them unerringly down the hill, with the storm beating at their backs, until they reached the corner of the bungalow. Jack finally half carried Pearl Mary, and Billy was glad of the aid of the big fellow's arm. But Jack did not rate this support very high. Mere muscular power he had in abundance; Billy had something better, and he realized that fact now as never before. And Pearl Mary appreciated Billy's mastery!

Around on the south side of the house they waited to get their breath, and then Billy and the girl went in laughing as though they had been on a frolic, instead of having been in peril of their lives. Jack waited outside a bit in the storm. He could not trust himself within just then. But he made a vow—and this vow sweetened his future life and purified his nature as by fire:

"God helping me, I'll think no longer of myself, or of my own desire; I'll live for them both, and if I cannot share their happiness, at least I will do what I can to aid it. I'll be no dog in the manger!"

The family's fright, which was turned to rejoicing so quickly, really began a merry evening. The relief that they all felt melted naturally into a spirit of hilarity. Let the storm howl, and the snow pack down in drifts about the bungalow, they were housed, and were warm, and they had each other.

The fact that the morrow was likely to be a very "lean" Christmas with them did not trouble any member of the family much, although Billy mentioned later in the evening that they might find a "vegetarian Christmas" quite a novelty.

"We are going to have a plum-pudding, at any rate," declared Pearl Mary. "I saw to that. I got the raisins and cur-

"Eh?" ejaculated
prise. And he eat.

"All right. You
much this time off."

"The horses
Mr. Short.

"You'll draw
said Billy, calmly,
for every load."

"Why—why
well as his book
stuff?"

"Suit your
turned Billy,"

"There's a
Sowersby's,"
there? I'll see.

Billy agreed
from the cell.
Short considered
very pleased
regarding it.
shut off him
good-natured
friendly.

"You
farm?"

ain't you

"Yes,"
Billy, to
the land
whole lot.

"I
Short,
young
which
the n-

Widder Cruise's oil-jug
g some of the blanche
going to have a try at
it of the cove, near
ideal patch for celery." "It all, Jack?" cried Pear
g fellow's rather awkw
er's confusion:

gridiron, Sis. Never I
ood motto. You can be
odies, and he didn't ste
what Jack had done. Fo
her's watch—the one the
had to leave school an
Jack had not been wearin
one injury while at work, a
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sides almost to the eaves.
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but feel some apprehension tha
might bring them to a worse s
nfronted them when they were
own!

"little income then," soliloquized B

rants more than three weeks ago—and the money did not come out of the family exchequer—so you need not look sour, Mr. Billy Herron! I taught Mrs. Short how to knit ‘Lias a comforter and she insisted on paying me for it.’”

“ See how unobservant this girl is,” chuckled Billy. “ She accuses me of looking sour, when I was only blissfully contemplating a slice of the pudding.”

Aunt Nannie just then brought in an apronful of hickory nuts and some big red apples which she had hidden away for this very occasion. The hickory nuts she had herself gathered on Mr. Short’s land.

“ And I’m sure to-morrow will be an occasion to open a can or two of our peaches,” said Granny, smiling.

Jack was suddenly started into activity. He sprang up from the floor where he had been sitting, cross-legged like a Turk—or a tailor—and rushed to the door.

“ Mercy me!” cried Granny. “ What does that boy hear? Surely there’s nobody else out in this storm at this hour?”

Jack grubbed in the snowbank beside the door and finally brought in a bulky gunny-sack which he dumped down upon the hearth, where it began to steam at once. The family looked on in expectancy while he untied the string that held the mouth of the bag.

“ It’s just like Santa Claus!” cried Pearl Mary. “ You do lack whiskers, Jackie-boy; but we won’t be over-particular, considering that yo uare the only Santa we are likely to see this year.”

Jack thrust his arm into the bag and brought forth, by his soberly crossed and tied legs, a plump turkey! The chorused exclamations of delight and surprise encouraged the big fellow to “ grab ” again, and he produced a bag of flour. Granny hugged this, and sat with it in her arms, as though it were a baby, for of late cornmeal and oatmeal had been their staple grains. A pail of lard followed, and last from this conjurer’s bag came a fine bunch of plumpy celery!

“ We’ve got one big Hubbard squash,” said Granny, smiling and rocking her bag of flour. “ You children shall have a squash pie that *is* a squash pie!”

"Anything more in that Widder Cruise's oil-jug of yours, Jack?" demanded Billy, chewing some of the blanched leaves of the celery, thoughtfully. "I'm going to have a try at raising this stuff next year. The lower part of the cove, near where that spring bubbles up, would be an ideal patch for celery."

"But wherever did you get it all, Jack?" cried Pearl Mary.

"That's telling," was the big fellow's rather awkward reply. Billy broke in to cover his brother's confusion:

"Now, don't put him on the gridiron, Sis. Never look a gift horse in the mouth, is a mighty good motto. You can bet Jack did not run into debt for these goodies, and he didn't steal them."

Secretly he knew instantly what Jack had done. For several days Billy had missed his brother's watch—the one the baseball nine had given him when Jack had to leave school and resign the captaincy of the team. Jack had not been wearing it for months, for fear of doing it some injury while at work, and Billy suspected that the trinket had paid for the family's Christmas dinner.

They had a very happy evening indeed. When they retired, the swish of the driven snow was still audible, but the wind could not rock the bungalow on its solid foundations, and the snow was heaped about it on three sides almost to the eaves. Occasionally a dull explosion reached their ears—at first startling Pearl Mary and Aunt Nannie; but Billy explained that the sound was due only to branches in the forest breaking off from the weight of the snow upon them. After they were all in bed the crooning of the wind, the "sh! sh!" of the snow, and the dull booming of the falling trees and branches, punctuated by the snapping of the coals in the fireplace (the fire had been carefully covered with ashes) was all Billy heard, and he lay awake for hours. The young fellow had much to make him anxious. He reviewed the year's work, realizing fully how their labor had been blessed; yet he could not help but feel some apprehension that the venture they had undertaken might bring them to a worse situation than that which had confronted them when they were immured in the cheap flat in town!

"At least, we had some little income then," soliloquized Billy.

"Pearl Mary was earning, and when her work at the furshop stopped, she might have obtained a situation elsewhere. Jack could have found some kind of a job in town—if nothing more than a laborer's. I had half a day's work myself with Mr. Mendon. We could have scrubbed along somehow; we did for two years. And if worse came to worst, there was always Uncle Calvert. I could beg or borrow ten dollars of him. But he's got through with us now. Our obstinacy in coming out here into the country gave him the excuse he desired for 'washing his hands of us,' as he calls it. I suppose every tub should stand on its own bottom; but without a bottom to stand on, what's *this* tub going to do?" demanded Billy of the silence of the night.

"And if Jack had work, and could get to and from the place where the work was this weather, we would be robbing Peter to pay Paul. His time—almost every hour of it—is needed right here on this place. If we are to make our living here next year, and raise enough to keep the family over the following Winter, there are a thousand things to do. As we can, the land must be cleared so that we can plant it in the Spring. Otherwise, what surely have we for the future? We must work for the future with scarce a handhold on the present! There must be a way opened. If we did right in accepting Mr. Mendon's offer, and building this house, and trying to establish ourselves here, the same Overwatch that made these things possible must still bear us in mind."

Billy's thought thrilled him, and he repeated one of his own amorphisms: "Do the best you can; then give the Omnipotence a chance to help you!"

With this thought, and an unshaken faith in its truth and wisdom, he finally dropped asleep, lulled by the voice of the storm which raged about the bungalow on the hillside. No sunrise rays disturbed their sleep-held eyes that Christmas morning. As far as the Herrons were concerned, the sun did not rise at all! Windows and doors were masked in the drifts, and when Billy and Jack came down from the loft and heaped dry wood on the half-dead coals of the fire, they filled the big pot with snow from that piled before the doorway, and hung it on the crane to melt as the first

flames leaped about it. To get water from the upland spring was impossible, for although Billy had carefully covered the open well with brush before the storm set in, it would be buried under yards of drift.

When the women-folk appeared, Jack fought his way through the drift at the door and through the tunnel he made, the daylight streamed in. The snow had stopped falling; it had turned to sleet at the last, and now the keener air had frozen a crust upon the drifts that glistened like sheet-silver in the sunshine, and would soon bear up a man. For the temperature was falling and the nipping of toes, and fingers, and ears, showed how cold it was.

The snow was not so very deep on the south side—the front—of the bungalow; but at the back one could have walked from the roof directly upon the crust of the drift which lay there. And it was heaped far above the bedroom windows on the east end, and half way to the top of the chimney at the other end of the house.

"Oh, my poor chickens!" wailed Pearl Mary, when she got out into the space the boys first cleared before the house door. "They will be frozen, and the chicks will be starved."

"If they are frozen they won't mind such a little thing as starvation," returned Billy, chuckling. "But cheer up! I'm more afraid they will be smothered under all that snow," for the henhouse was merely a great mound.

Jack and Mr. Herron did the bulk of the snow shoveling, and they dug a path to the henhouse, and another to the shanty nearby which was filled with firewood—both kindling and dry logs cut to the right length for use in the fireplace. The hens and chicks were all right, and before noon Jack managed to clear a small place for them to promenade in and get a breath of air and a little sunshine.

The outlook from the door of the bungalow was very beautiful; yet the fact that they were so shut away from all the rest of the world seemed to be emphasized by the dazzling drifts. They could look across the cove, and down through a part of Sowersby's place; but the Medway road was of course out of sight, and nowhere could they see another human habitation. Not even the friendly smoke from a neighbor's chimney made the site of the bungalow seem less a wilderness! The beauty of the cove

must be admitted; but its loneliness was greater than any of the Herrons had realized.

But there wasn't one of them who accentuated this fact by either look or word. The Christmas spirit of sacrifice for the welfare of the others possessed them all. Love ruled in the log house, and out of their very poverty, and the makeshifts it necessitated, they managed to extract merriment.

Besides, was not Jack's turkey roasting in the grandest way on a spit before the fire, with a huge "dripping-pan" under the bird to catch the juices? And the steam from the squash, and the turnips, and the beets, and the parsnips, and the scorned onions which even Pearl Mary had learned to eat, permeated every cranny of the house, and made the boys perfectly ravenous when they came in to the fire now and then for a "warm." The frost-snap in the air grew sharper after noonday; Jack Frost is always a giver of good appetites, and should be set up in some niche as a household god, for that reason!

The turkey of course was a triumph. And Granny's squash pie—Well! it left little to be desired; although the pudding that followed it, and which rounded out the Christmas dinner, was pronounced the best she had ever made. They were making merry over the hickory nuts and apples when there was suddenly a shout from outside. It astonished them so much that there could be any other human being in the midst of this white waste, that for a moment nobody moved, or spoke. Then Pearl Mary jumped up, as the cry was repeated, and ran to the door, flinging it open.

"Jefers-pelters!" drawled a relieved voice. "If I didn't have the 'tarnalest scare of my life. I been strugglin' over these blame drif's, slippin' back about two feet ter ev'ry one I made ahead—"

"Then you got here by walking backward, 'Lias!" called Billy, gaily. "Come in! come in!"

"Ye was all out of sight here, an' not a sound or a movement," complained Mr. Short, stamping his boots on the door-stone. "I begun to fear ye was all froze stiff—Jefers-pelters! snug as a bug in a rug in here, I do declare!"

His eyes popped open wide indeed and he stood grinning in

huge delight at the homely, pleasant scene in the big living-room. "Now, ain't you folks jest the beatenest!" he declared, beginning to unwind the "comforter" that Pearl Mary had taught his wife to knit. He had already set a big covered basket andt a pail on the floor on either side of him. "Here ye be—in the wilderness—without a neighbor—nor no friends—an' mighty little but God A'mighty to depend upon—— An' ye air as jolly as grigs!"

"Crying never mended the broken kettle yet, 'Lias," said Billy. "And I always have claimed that it's easier to make the best of a thing than to make the worst of it! . . . But I reckon," he added, slyly, "that we have some neighbors and friends who haven't forgotten us. Otherwise, why have you walked clear up here over the drifts, eh?"

"Oh, *me?*" exclaimed Short. "Mother stuffed me so at dinner that I jest had to git out and walk a bit to save myself from droppin' down of apoplexy. And she kinder thought I better come this way, jest ter see if you was dug out yit; and as I was comin', I might jest as well bring some things along that she could spare jest as well as not——"

Mr. Short's explanation might have been unending had not he thrust the basket and pail into Pearl Mary's hands, and she of course opened them. Her squeals of delight drowned the good fellow's awkward excuses for doing a kindly act, and he clumped over to the fireplace to warm himself and to let the snow from his boots melt on the brick hearth rather than upon Granny's clean floor.

There was milk in the can; the Herrons had had a little every day from the Shorts when they lived at Rack and Ruin Villa, but it was too far to go for it now. Then there was a fine pat of butter and links of homemade sausage, and a whole headcheese, and some home-cured bacon, and salt pork, and a ham. The women folk buzzed over them in raptures and Billy wrung Mr. Short's hand with a feeling in his heart too deep for words.

"I got news for you, Billy Herron," said the farmer, in haste to change the topic of conversation from his own kind-heartedness. "Bob Biggup has had to go south ag'in. His lungs is mighty weak. He went ten days ago, and his brother tells me

he's already so snarled up in his book accounts that he don't know whether he's makin' money enough ter buy an automobile, or is on the quickest road to the poorhouse. So he told me ter tell you, Billy, ter come down and see him. You helped him out last year mighty cheap. Now, you take my advice; haggle with Tom Biggup a little; he'll stand for a good bargain if you go about it right."

If the family in the log house had been happy before, this news raised the temperature of their joy to blood-heat! And was it not in direct answer to Billy's questioning of the night? He had done his best; now a way seemed opened for them to "hang on." Jack could not be spared from the work of preparing their own place for the next season's campaign; but Billy knew that the grain-dealer's books would not occupy all of *his* time during the week.

The way had been opened. In Billy's heart, at least, there welled up a feeling of thankfulness that hallowed the day indeed. The first Christmas in the Heron Nest was one not likely to be forgotten by any of them. There was an added peace in their hearts when they sought their beds that night, while the white moonlight flooded the waste of frozen snow which shut in the loghouse on the mountain-side.

CHAPTER XVII.

CLEARING THE WAY.

Billy was not going down to the village to see Mr. Biggup, the livery stable man and grain dealer, until the following Monday morning. They all had a good deal to do about the house, and in shoveling the drifts away from the buildings. A path had to be made to the spring and they uncovered it; each morning Jack had to chop out the ice before they could get water for the use of the family.

"I'll have pipes laid here, and the well properly covered in, before I'm six months older, if I don't do another thing!" declared Billy to his brother. "It is bad enough to ask women to live and work under such disadvantages as our folk have to put up with; there are two inalienable rights of the female sex that they should demand before they demand the right of suffrage."

"What are they?" queried Jack, grinning.

"They should demand plenty of seasoned wood in the kitchen and a water supply right at hand. The cause of woman's rights will never spread to any appreciable extent among country folk until those two planks are spiked firmly in the platform of the party."

The crust on the snow was so thick by Monday that Billy found little difficulty in walking down to Medway. And all the way his heart sang a thanksgiving hymn, if an inaudible one, because he could travel so much better than he had been able to a year before!

Mr. Tom Biggup was glad to see him, and keeping 'Lias Short's advice in mind, Billy spent some time in "bargaining"—a pastime in which the grain-dealer thoroughly enjoyed himself. In the end Billy obtained an agreement that was very fair indeed. Mr. Biggup was to pay the young fellow three dollars per week in cash, and Billy was to be at the store only four days in the week, and then only from mid-forenoon till evening. In addition, when the roads were cleared, Jack was to draw all the stable scrapings he had time to cart when Mr. Biggup's team was not in use. 'At least two loads a week were to be the Herrons' and as Big-

gup was a just, if a sharp man, Billy knew that his brother would be able to get a good deal of fertilizer against the next season.

And just the kind of enrichment Billy wanted for his garden. When they moved, 'Lias Short had carted the Herrons' compost heap to their new home, and some distance from the house Billy proposed to have a huge pile where this already decayed mass of vegetable matter, and the stable scrapings, could be thoroughly mixed, and turned over, and put into condition for the next season. No commercial fertilizer is as rich in humus as a rightly prepared compost heap; and the commercial fertilizer was altogether too expensive for the Herrons.

With the little Billy made, and the returns from Aunt Nannie's work, the family would be able to obtain food during the Winter; but there would be nothing with which to buy seed, and the grade of onion seed alone that Billy wanted to purchase was four dollars a pound. Pearl Mary's pullets had not stopped laying, and she had customers in the village that, after Christmas, paid her as high as five cents apiece for the few she could bring them. But the egg money only paid for the supplies she had to buy for the hens and chicks. Billy told her not to expect any surplus from the hen industry for two years, at least.

Meanwhile Jack and Mr. Herron were as busy as though there had been no snow at all on the ground. It is the farmer who works twelve months in the year, not nine months, who is successful. Winter is the season to prepare for the real work of the year, and if a man is wise he will not waste the precious three months, or more, when the land cannot be worked in our climate!

In the first place the log and brush shelter the boys had made, was an excellent place in which to saw and split wood. In building the chimney of the bungalow, Billy had built in a proper flue, and had promised his grandmother that, out of the first money he could spare, he would buy a range for the kitchen. Jack and his father would have time to prepare all the wood that could possibly be needed for use during the Summer.

Jack bore his share of the responsibility of their needs, too; he was as much awake as Billy to the necessity of turning every opportunity to account. A light snow fell and covered the hard

crust of the drifts that filled every hollow in the mountain side. Not until then did Jack realize how many small creatures there were about the woods and wild places in the Winter. Of course, the squirrels each had his particular hoarded provision; but the foxes tracked near the henhouse, there were plenty of wild birds to come and chatter over the crumbs Pearl Mary threw outside the bungalow door, and farther from the house were innumerable rabbit trails.

The rabbits were pretty creatures, but they were fair prey for a hungry boy, too. Mr. Short had some old traps, and he lent them to Jack, who cleaned and oiled them, and set them carefully where the bunnies passed. Almost every morning, unless it stormed, Jack got a brace, and although the women-folk refused to eat them, Billy exchanged them at the market in the village for the flesh of other animals which, in life, had been quite as pretty as the bunnies. 'Lias Short declared the rabbits often became a veritable plague in the neighborhood.

On his visit to Mr. Short when he borrowed the traps Jack had noted the condition of the creek which ran through the entire width of the Herrons' farm, and which on the previous Winter had scarcely frozen. But the heavy snow at Christmas had blocked the stream for a time, and upon a level piece of meadow the water had "backed up" and was frozen into a pond of some half acre in extent. This piece of land he remembered had been a bit swampy in Summer, too; there were doubtless springs here which partly fed the pond.

The ice was in good condition, and Jack wished that they might store some for their own use next year. He and Billy had the plans and description for the building of a hillside icehouse, and some time they hoped to excavate one behind the bungalow. But not this Winter!

The idea set Jack's mind to work, however, and he finally evolved a scheme that he put into execution without taking Billy into his confidence. He knew that his brother was vastly troubled about the money needed for seeds, and this opportunity which offered itself might supply the necessary funds.

The Van Coe house and stables had been covered in before the

snow came, and the carpenters, and plasterers, and later the decorators, were busy on the job. The owner and his daughter, Mr. Short told Jack, were frequently out in their sleigh to see what progress was being made, and Jack made it a point to be on the spot one afternoon when Mr. Van Coe was there.

Miss Van Coe, bundled in her furs, welcomed him warmly. She admired Jack's manliness—his good looks, his physique, even his apologetic smile. Van Coe himself was of that type of banker who judges every soul he meets by a monetary standard—one of those financial magnates who are as obsequious as a crossingsweeper to men with more money, or more influence, than they themselves possess, but who pass their honest porters and faithful clerks three hundred days in the year without even a decent "Good morning!" This individual would have given Jack little attention had the young fellow first approached him with his scheme; but Jack was wise enough to interest Miss Van Coe first.

While the young lady was asking about Pearl Mary, and the family in general, and gushing a lot of airy nothings that Jack realized were intended to be friendly and kind, the big fellow managed to get in an introductory word regarding his Great Idea. He interested Miss Van Coe at once, and she grew enthusiastic and called her father to listen.

"Father, do you realize how very foolish we are?" she cried. "I insisted upon your having a refrigerator built into the pantry back of the kitchen, with a way of putting in the ice from the porch, and all the time neither of us inquired how we were to get an ice supply here."

"Isn't there ice sold in the village?" asked her father.

"Mr. Herron tells me that nobody retails ice there. None of the city companies deliver ice out this way. Those who use it in the village get their supply from the millpond, and house it down there. It is a close corporation, and their house is small, and they never have too much. Sometimes the butcher has to buy a carload of ice on his own responsibility, they run so short. Mr. Darnell cut his own ice and stacked it behind the stables, Mr. Herron says, in a temporary building that burned when the others were destroyed."

"Ha!" ejaculated her father. "Then we can do the same."

"But there is no ice privilege on our place," laughed his daughter. "You know, you would not buy the higher acres from Mr. Mendon, and they belong to Mr. Herron and his brother now. Mr. Herron was just telling me that they have plenty of ice up there ready to cut."

Mr. Van Coe, seeing that it might be for his interest to deal with "Mr. Herron," favored Jack with rather a sour smile. "Where can I stack ice, Louise? We certainly cannot excavate for the foundations of an icehouse at this time of year," said the gentleman.

Jack had every line of the plan perfectly drawn in his own mind. He respectfully suggested that Mr. Van Coe use the cellar under the old toolhouse, where the Herrons had lived, for an icehouse during the first Summer of the new owner's occupancy of the place. He even showed the gentleman how the carpenters then at work on the house and stable could, at a small expense, build a rough inner partition in the cemented cellar, and between that plank partition and the outer masonry the space could be filled with swamp hay to be purchased of Mr. Short. The result would be a very good substitute for an icehouse, and would afford storage for several tons of the commodity—enough to last the Van Coes through the Summer.

"And I'll fill the cellar for you with good ice, at least six inches thick, for thirty dollars," was the earnest Jack's concluding remark.

Mr. Van Coe took time to think the matter over and make inquiries for himself; he was a cautious man. But within the week he wrote Jack that he accepted his offer and that, by the time he could deliver the ice, the cellar would be made ready to receive it. Jack immediately engaged Mr. Short's team and his stone-drag. From the butcher at the village, who owned the implements, the young fellow borrowed a saw, a hand ice-plow, and pikes. The local ice company was not ready yet to harvest the mill-pond ice. They wanted eight inch cakes, and expected to get that thickness in February.

Jack and his father cut the ice and transported it to the Van

Coe place in less than another week. Mr. Short got five dollars for the use of his team and Jack put twenty-five in his brother's hand before Billy even suspected what was being done during his absence in the village, where he struggled from Monday morning to Friday night with Biggup's books. This windfall delighted everybody, and Billy sent at once for the bulk of the seeds they expected to use during the coming season.

However, unless the stumps and roots could be got out of the ground, how were the Herrons to plant a garden in the cove on the mountain-side? They could not dig the stumps out while the ground was frozen, and the snow was heaped upon it, and it, in some cases, drifted over the stumps themselves. Such a method would have been most toilsome, too, and would have taken Jack and his father perhaps a day or two on each stump. It was then that Billy's mysterious operations on the stumpage on the southern slope of the cove, was explained.

The first snags that he had bored into and "doctored" had now been drinking kerosene for three or four months. Whenever he had had time during the Winter he had operated on other stumps until he had prepared those on more than half of the open ground in the cove. But he began proving his scheme valuable on those stumps that he had first tackled near the bungalow. On a certain sunshiny, quiet January day he invited the whole family to see the first stump "touched off."

Pearl Mary, Granny, and Aunt Nannie were inclined to stand afar off and hold their hands over their ears—believing that the stumps must "go off" with some kind of a report. Billy pulled the plugs in the first one, stuffed an oil-soaked wick of cotton waste in each aperture, and touched them off. They burned rather slowly at first, and with a good deal of smoke, but when the oily wood fairly got afire, intense flames shot three or four feet into the air, and the wood was rapidly consumed.

The fire melted the snow for yards about, and took the frost out of the ground as well. Not only did the entire stump above ground burn, but the fire smouldered down through the big roots which had become saturated with the oil, so that in 48 hours Jack went over the site of the stump with a grubbing-hoe, found most of the

roots destroyed, and worked the soil and ashes up fine for a depth of twelve or eighteen inches before the heat got out and the frost got in again.

"And this ash will be just like gold in the soil for us next season!" crowed the big fellow, wielding his heavy implement like a giant. "Oh, Billy! you certainly take the prize."

"I've a good memory for what I read, that's all," retorted his modest brother.

The first stump having been incinerated so nicely, they set several others off on each pleasant day. And meanwhile Billy kept to work on more of them, boring the holes, filling them again and again with oil, until the fiber of the wood was well saturated. Such as did not burn cleanly, Jack and his father knocked to pieces, grubbing out the roots as best they could. It was a mighty task, but the results amply repaid their efforts. Square yards of the sidehill were cleared in this manner every day, and as the accumulated snow, too, fled before the intense heat of the burning stumppage, the black earth was revealed and the boys were delighted to see how free from trash the growing plot of tillable land appeared.

The smoke of their fires rose daily unless a storm intervened, and after Jack's ice harvest was concluded, he and their father were engaged entirely in the work until the middle of February. Then the boys set up their hotbed, Jack drew the green manure for it from the village as he had the previous season, and their early seeds were confided to the bed. They had planned to raise much the same crop as the year previous only, later, Billy proposed to try two varieties of celery which, he was sure, would do well in the moist patch near the lower spring.

There was a little lull, and Jack was able to work for nearly two weeks steadily for Mr. Short, as that good neighbor wanted to rebuild his wife's buttery and make some other repairs to his house. This enabled the Herrons to reduce the bill they owed Short nearly one-quarter, and it encouraged Billy to agree to have Mr. Short bring up his heavy plow and double harrow, and to go over the sidehill that had been completely cleared of stumps and roots, as soon as the frost was out of the ground. To pay for

this favor, and so as not to add to Mr. Short's bill, Jack helped the farmer with his own plowing when the time came, and saved 'Lias the expense of hiring a man until April.

Billy and his father planted the first peas and the onion sets quite as early as the year before. This slope to the south was a grateful piece of ground to work. It was ready for their purpose even before the snow had entirely disappeared from the fence corners and other sheltered places.

During the Winter Pearl Mary had set her hens when they had become broody. But she sold the eggs they laid and purchased well-bred stock for her settings, and so brought off the maximum percentage of healthy chicks. Up to March 1 she had hatched 67 chicks out of five settings of eggs, beside the 19 December chicks they had brought with them from Rack and Ruin Villa. Out of the 86 she lost, in various ways, 27. On the first of March Jack killed and dressed for her 10 broilers, which sold for 32 cents per pound, amounting to an even \$4. Soon after the beginning of March Mr. Short's hens became broody again, and the young girl borrowed half a dozen motherly biddies and Billy spent \$8 for a hundred guaranteed eggs from the dealer who had previously supplied them. Pearl Mary's method of feeding and caring for her laying fowls kept them working as egg producers until late in the Spring, and almost all the Spring hatch was accomplished by borrowed biddies. Jack built six chicken runs like the one they had used the season before, and soon there were more than a hundred lively chicks cheeping in them. Every week, or two, they killed a few broilers, selling them for almost enough to pay for the chicken food which had to be bought.

Billy's job of keeping books for the grain-dealer came to an end about now, for with the first breath of Spring Bob Biggup returned from the South. The work in the cove on the mountain-side was well under way; quite an acre had been planted, mostly to onions; and then the family found itself in one of those periodic lean times when famine actually stared them in the face, and when the general exchequer was totally empty.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ROAD MAKERS.

Like many other old-fashioned country communities, the town of Medway built its roads at quite the wrong season of the year —either in the very late Fall, or the very early Spring. Saving the so-called “State” roads, none of the town highways were macadamized; and the farmer-taxpayers demanded the right of working out their road-tax at a time when both horses and men could best be spared from the farm. So, following the early plowing and planting the road repair gangs were out in full force.

The taxes on their place was no small burden for the Herrons to carry, and 'Lias Short, knowing this, determined that the boys should get what he called a “square deal” with the road-master, who hired the gangs and arranged the work to be done at that season of the year. It was all right for Jack to be appointed to a gang and draw his two-seventy-five per day; he could and would do every bit as much work as any other member of the party of road makers. But Billy could use neither a pick, or a shovel, and the Herrons had no team to drive. The sharp Mr. Short introduced Billy to the road surveyor, and that individual saw at once that the young fellow with the withered limb was no ordinary chap, and that he was quite worthy of the confidence 'Lias had in him. He questioned Billy, explained some points about the work, and then set him over the gang that was to repair the piece of road from the bridge over the creek, just on the outskirts of the village, to and beyond Short's own farm. This appointment was worth three and a half a day, and was a good deal of a sinecure, for every man on the job knew just about what he had to do. There were the gutters to plow out, the loose earth to be scraped into the middle of the highway and decently graded, and the low places to be filled with gravel brought from the bank opposite Short's house.

There was some little jealousy evinced by some of the men and

boys working in the gang over the appointment of Billy Herron as "boss." This jealousy would neither have spread, or continued, however, had it not been fostered by the Sowersbys, who, of course, were in the gang; Billy proved himself in a single day well able to fill the responsible position, and the most of the workmen found him likable. Although he could not do much of the active work himself, his words of advice were helpful every time, and his instructions were given so clearly that nobody could really complain. The older men saw very quickly that he had a clear head on his shoulders, and the work went on apace.

There were three span of oxen with which to plow out the ditches, and Mr. Sowersby himself handled the plow. His son drove one of the carts that drew gravel from the pit to the places indicated by Billy as needing additional soil to grade up the highway. The gang commenced at the bridge and worked up the hill, because the wash during the past year had carried much loose earth down the cut, clogging the lower ends of the gutters.

Mr. Sowersby did not make Billy any direct trouble; but the red-headed Bub created a disturbance from the start. He sneered at the "kid boss," and cracked so-called jokes at the expense of Billy's game leg. There were just enough thoughtless fellows in the gang to give young Sowersby the backing he needed to make him bold in this. Billy had intentionally placed Jack on the plow with Mr. Sowersby and Short, so that the big fellow would be far enough away from the red-headed youth to preclude any trouble. He did not notice young Sowersby's attempts to be funny; but when the fellow tried to disturb him by slighting the work Billy had to take notice.

Bub in the first place skimped his loads; his cart was never more than three-quarters full. Billy, who kept tally of each load, informed him briefly that he would have to bring an extra load at the end of the day if he wished to be credited for a full day's pay on the time sheet. Of course, that started trouble on the instant, but Billy was firm.

"Every five minutes you stand here arguing with me about it, I'll deduct likewise from your time," he declared. "Don't be

foolish. You are not working for me; you're working for the town."

Bub found he did not have the popular backing of the crowd on this point, so he dropped it; but he did not drop his flings of cheap wit whenever he was in earshot of Billy. The latter made no reply.

Then Sowersby invented another way of tormenting the "boss." When he brought a load of gravel there was mixed with it a number of good sized rocks that Billy did not dare allow to remain in the roadway for fear they would work to the surface after the road had settled. These rocks the teamsters were instructed to throw out when loading their carts.

The second time Bub dumped such a load Billy called him down from his seat, handed him a rake, and ordered him to rake out the rocks and fling them back in his cart again. "If you won't sort over your load at the pit, Sowersby," said Billy, to the delight of the onlookers, "you'll have to do it here. Suit yourself."

The laugh was on Bub that time, and he hadn't the pluck to refuse the command when he saw that he lacked public approval for his course. He grumpily raked out the young bowlders, flung them back in his cart, and rattled away in a hurry, for he was already behind schedule in his day's work.

The innate meanness of the fellow, however, could but drive him to annoy Billy if possible. When he arrived with his next load and Billy pointed out the exact spot where he wished it dumped, Bub deliberately pulled his tail-board and poured the gravel several yards from the spot indicated. Then he jumped into the cart again and rattled back to the pit with a satisfied grin. The men spreading the gravel were forced to drag the heap much farther than should have been necessary to fill the hollow in the roadway. It looked as though Billy had used poor judgment in ordering the gravel dumped where it was.

The next time Bub arrived he did exactly the same thing. When the spreading gang came to the heap they began to grumble; and Billy couldn't blame them. There wasn't a mean hair in Billy's head, but neither was he foolish enough to allow this red-

headed young rascal to make him further trouble. When Bub drove down again, young Herron made sure that several of the spreading gang saw clearly where he pointed to Sowersby to dump the load.

"And be sure you get it in the right spot," advised the lame youth, sternly. "We've had quite enough of your carelessness."

Bub scowled at him, drove his horses over the spot, and then deliberately dumped his load at least four yards further on.

"Now," said Billy, "you can take your choice of being sent to the road surveyor with your time, or you can get down and rake this pile to the place here where I told you to dump it. I've had all the nonsense I'm going to stand from you——"

"Aw, you go on!" snarled the red-headed youth. "I dumped it where you told me to."

"We won't discuss it. I've told you what you could do. There's a rake if you want to repair your error. Otherwise, you're through!"

"I'm fired, am I?" cried Bub, getting down threateningly.

But the bystanders would not stand for Bub making any personal attack on a fellow who was little more than half his size, and a cripple at that. "You've had your fun," said Andrew Gaby, a farmer's son from farther up the road. "You've been kiddin' all day, Bub; might's well pay the fiddler for your dancin'."

"Take the rake, Sonny, and set to work," advised a gray-bearded workman. "I reckon the young boss has got the rights of it."

There seemed nothing left for young Sowersby to do, and he did it. But he no longer tried to play silly tricks on Billy Herron; the expression of his face when he looked at the young overseer of the work was threatening and evil. Billy, however, refused to notice him, save only to see that he did his work and carted his full complement of loads to make a day's "stint."

There was no more trouble that day, and Billy said nothing regarding young Sowersby to Jack. But the story spread; the other members of the gang rather enjoyed seeing the "youngster," as they called Billy, get the best of the red-headed one.

So Jack got the story that night through 'Lias Short, and

before the gang started to work the next morning Jack went to old Sowersby himself.

"Mr. Sowersby," he said, firmly, "I don't want to speak to that boy of yours, for if I do I know I'll have to lick him—and I guess you've seen enough of me to know that it won't be a very hard job for me, either! But you tell him from me that if he makes my brother any further trouble, or even makes too many funny cracks at Billy's expense, he won't even find a joke in the almanac funny enough to laugh at for a month! I'll give him the biggest kind of a licking, and don't you forget it."

"I don't know for sure that you'd be able to do that, Herron," said the old man, "but I'll see that there ain't no more foolin' on Bub's part. I told him so already, so you needn't be bullyin'."

The breach between the Sowersbys and the Herrons was naturally widened because of this. And it did not end with this armistice, either. There was more to follow, and there was an explosion that very day at noon. Some of the men who lived nearest ('Lias Short, for instance) went home to dinner; some brought their midday meal with them. Pearl Mary came down from the cove with a hot dinner for Billy and Jack.

The oxen and horses were feeding on one side of the road and the men on the other. The ox-carts stood in the roadway, on the finished part, just at the top of the steep slope that led straight down to the bridge over the creek. At the bridge there was a sharp turn, where a horse path led down beside the wooden structure to a ford where one could drive in and water his horse without waiting to reach Biggup's trough before the grain-store in the center of the village.

The farthest cart, tail to the hill, stood with its wheels chocked with a couple of rocks. Billy had been down the hill looking over the gang's work to see if it would pass muster with the surveyor. Some of the younger fellows were fooling around this cart, and, as Billy started back, he saw Pearl Mary with the pail standing on the high bank and waving her hand to him.

When Billy reached the cart only Bub Sowersby stood by it; the other fellows had passed on. "Don't be in a hurry, Limpy!" said Bub, grinning. "Yer sister can wait a minute,

can't she? Say! you was goin' to fire me, was ye? And ye sicked yer brother onter me, too. Aw, where ye're goin'?"

Billy had been walking deliberately on; but the long-armed fellow reached out and grabbed him, dragging him behind the cart. Billy struck him, and struck hard! It would have been quite impossible for him to run had he wanted to, but he could fight. There was nothing the matter with the development of his biceps, and Bub found out that fact, and in a most surprising manner, within the next few seconds.

Billy rained a shower of blows on the fellow's ugly face. Blood spurted from poor Bub's very prominent nose; both eyes received attention from Billy's vigorous fists, and one of Bub's front teeth was loosened and his lips were cut. He had probably never been so surprised in all his life before! He had considered the youth with the crippled leg a weakling, and Billy's patience and dislike of strife had led Bub to believe that young Herron could not protect himself.

Now he was half blinded by Billy's blows, and was too enraged to care what he did. Billy had struck the back of his head on the bottom of the cart and was dazed for half a minute. When he could scramble to his knees the heavy oxcart was jouncing on its way very swiftly—so swiftly that the young fellow did not dare try to throw himself from the cart.

Handicapped by his crippled limb, he could not leap over the heavy wheel. He dared not drop over the tailboard and throw himself flat upon the ground, to let the cart pass over him; the heavy tongue of the cart might give him a fatal blow if he tried it. His only hope was to creep back, get out upon the tongue itself, and drop off. And could he do this before the swiftly moving cart reached the bottom of the hill?

The vehicle, if it did not swerve to one side before getting to the bottom, would either crash into the guardrail of the bridge, and be flung into the creek; or the wheels would take the path right down to the ford, and Billy might be dumped out on the rocks in either case!

There was a wild hullabaloo of voices behind, and a single glance assured him that most of the gang of workmen had already

started in pursuit of the runaway oxcart. Jack was in their lead, and he was coming down the road in great leaps; but his brother was well aware that none of them could aid him in the least.

That game leg was what bothered him. Another fellow would have quickly got out on the tongue of the cart and dropped off. He had to be so careful!

The cart bounded down the incline, increasing its speed with every revolution of the big wheels. Billy was jerked from side to side; he was almost flung out of the box half a dozen times before he managed to get his body on the tongue. Then he was astride of it, clinging to the wagon body, and being almost shaken from his hold every time the wheels bumped over a pebble.

He hesitated—and who would not in his position? Had he possessed two strong limbs, he could have flung himself sidewise and leaped into the road; but that weak leg held him back.

And then suddenly he heard a yell ahead. He caught an instant's glimpse of a man beside the roadway. The cart was already at the bridge, and it had swerved to one side. It was diving down the steep path to the ford.

"Jump!" yelled the man beside the road.

Billy saw him stretch his arms wide apart. A swerve of the cart's tongue and the young fellow was fairly shot into the air, and plunged, head first, into the arms of the stranger.

Like a stone from a catapult, he collided with the man, and both went to earth heavily, while the cart plunged down into the creek and overturned. Billy scrambled to his feet out of the ditch; but the man who had acted as his buffer lay where he had fallen, and to the young fellow's horror a trickle of blood showed from beneath the man's head. The stranger's eyes were closed, and he was evidently unconscious.

"Get some water, quick!" cried Billy, to Jack, who was the first to arrive at the scene.

Jack had no chance to gasp out his own satisfaction that his brother was unhurt, but ran to get the water, bringing it in his cap. Billy dashed some in the man's face. The fellow showed some signs of returning consciousness. They lifted him up and Jack bathed the wound in the back of his head.

"Oh! ouch!" muttered the man. "That smarts—let up!"

"He ain't dead, is he?" cried Andrew Gaby, who had likewise arrived at the foot of the hill.

"They don't talk much when they're real dead," grunted Jack, without looking up at the questioner.

"Nothing broken but his head, I guess—poor fellow!" murmured Billy, who had made a swift examination of the man's body.

"Couldn't you have jumped on me easier, boss?" demanded the man whose fortunate presence just at that spot, and at that time, had undoubtedly saved Billy Herron from serious injury. "Ugh! don't slop that water around so careless. I might drink some of it by mistake. Ow! feels like there was a hole in my head back there."

"Your feelings are all right then," said Jack. "The hole is there. Hold still till I bind it up with my handkerchief."

Billy began to look at the fellow with a deeper interest—and with an interest not aroused by the incident. Something in the fellow's tone and manner of speaking touched a cord of memory in the young man's mind. He scrutinized his personal appearance while Jack put on the bandage.

Clothing and physiognomy both pronounced the man a tramp. He possessed a most disreputable outfit of broken shoes and ragged garments; his face was bloated and his eyes bleared from drink. But his cheeks were cleanly shaven and his heavy roan mustache was neatly trimmed.

At the very moment Billy recognized the fellow Pearl Mary herself came hurriedly into the group which had gathered at the spot.

"Oh, Billy!" cried she; "are you hurt?"

The man with the roan mustache glanced up at the frightened girl.

"Gee! here's the girl herself," Billy heard him murmur. Then his eyes closed and he collapsed on Jack's arm.

"Im afraid he's hurt more than you think, Billy," said his brother, gravely. "What will we do with him?"

CHAPTER XIX.

"THE OLD MAN OF THE SEA."

For once Billy Herron was unable to dominate a situation. His mind was much disturbed by the appearance of this tramp, who had shown the spring before his remembrance of Mr. Herron and had tacitly admitted his connection with Pearl Mary's mysterious beginnings. The fellow seemed to have borne the young girl in mind, too, from his muttered words.

These thoughts kept Billy from giving his brother his attention. It was Pearl Mary herself who took the lead in the matter. She quickly understood that the stranger had saved Billy from injury, and had been hurt himself in so doing. She begged Andrew Gaby to run for the physician who lived the nearest, and when 'Lias Short rattled down the hill in his wagon, having heard of the trouble, she begged the men to make a couch of horse clothes for the injured tramp in the body of Short's wagon, and they laid him thereon.

"Only he ain't nothin' but one o' them hoboes," grumbled 'Lias himself, who had a natural antipathy for the idle, ne'er-do-wells. "I don't see how he come to ketch you, Billy Herron. Was it jest 'cause he was too lazy to move out'n the way?"

"Oh, hush, Mr. Short! Billy might have been killed if it had not been for the poor fellow."

"Don't wanter say nothin' ter hurt nobody's feelin's," said Short, "but there ain't many of his kind that's worth anythin'. . . . By the way, where's that rascal, Bud Sowersby, that brought all this trouble about?"

Bub, it seemed, had run home. He had been afraid to face the consequences of his wicked act—and afraid to face his father, too. It was the Sowersby oxcart that was pretty well smashed to pieces down there in the creek.

Billy pulled himself together and sent the men back to their jobs—even Jack; the one o'clock whistle at the Medway sawmill

had blown. By and by, Andrew returned with Dr. Olson, who examined the tramp and found, as Billy had stated, that no bones were broken. The wound in the back of the man's head was serious, however, and the physician said it was no wonder that the fellow lost consciousness and seemed dazed. He dressed the place properly, and he gave his instructions to Pearl Mary as though he expected her to care for the patient.

"Hold on!" said Billy. "We can't take him up to our house. We've got no room. I'll do all I can for him, for perhaps he saved me from serious injury; but I'll take him down into the village—"

"Just the place, boss," interrupted the straggler, with a weak smile. "And if you'll stand me a hooker or two at the gin-mill it'll put new life in me."

"That is what he certainly must *not* have," Dr. Olson said, quietly. "A clean cut in the head of a healthy person, like this wound, would give me no apprehension; but the fellow is fairly saturated with alcohol. If he is to recover safely from his injury he must keep away from drink."

"We must take him home, Billy," said Pearl Mary. "It would be cruel and ungrateful to allow him to go away in the shape he is. We can find some way of caring for him for a few days."

"You're the right sort, miss," declared the tramp, eyeing her curiously. "I won't be no trouble to youse—only to feed. I gotter appetite like a ostrige; it's kep' me poor all me life," and he winked.

Billy had never felt so much like being rankly ungrateful! It certainly was a stroke of bad fortune that Pearl Mary should have been in sight when the oxcart rolled down the hill. What would happen when this man and Mr. Herron met again? Would the latter recognize the tramp, and would Pearl Mary learn more of the truth about her parentage than Billy wished her to? The circumstances—following what Billy had been through so recently—troubled him desperately. What should he do? He could not neglect his work on the road and accompany them;

yet he saw Pearl Mary and the injured tramp finally take the path to the Herron Nest with serious misgivings.

He could scarcely wait in patience for the day's work to end, so anxious was he to get home. He refused to discuss the incident which had come so near proving fatal to him, with any of the men. He only told Mr. Sowersby that Bub could not come back to work on the road; he couldn't allow "horse-play" when the town was paying out good money for labor. And Mr. Sowersby had never a word to say by way of argument; he was only too thankful that Billy did not demand some reparation for the trick Bub had played upon him.

The Herrons went home eagerly at night, to find the tramp established with a blanket in the woodshed, where he had made himself very comfortable. It was warm and sheltered there, and he seemed contented enough—entirely too contented, to Billy's mind. As soon as Jack went into the house his brother sounded the man as to whether Mr. Herron had recognized him again; but the fellow refused to understand Billy's questions, and appeared entirely ignorant in the premises.

But he hung around the place, and while the boys were still engaged on the road, he helped Mr. Herron in a desultory way, and was always with him. Pearl Mary was exceedingly kind to him; but, whether this was because of the accident, or for some other reason, Billy could not tell. It disturbed his mind much to have the fellow in the neighborhood, and after several days, when the road work was finished and the boys could give all their time to their own affairs, Billy did something that afterwards he was secretly troubled over. He took two dollars of the money he received from the town treasurer and slipped it into the tramp's hand!

The fellow's head was healing nicely, and he seemed to have suffered no further bad effects from the accident. Perhaps he was about ready to travel on, anyway; but Billy was sure that the two dollars would burn in his pocket until he could get to some place where the money could be spent for his favorite tipple.

The next morning "Harry," as the tramp had told them to call him, was missing. Pearl Mary was dreadfully afraid that

some harm would befall him before his wound was quite healed, and even Granny and Aunt Nannie seemed sorry that he had gone without a word. But he had been like an Old Man of the Sea to Billy, and the latter gave thanks. Every hour he had been on the place Billy feared some word would be dropped that would betray the secret he wanted so much to learn himself, but feared so greatly to have Pearl Mary learn!

Meanwhile, the work in the cove went on apace. Every penny they could spare was spent to the improvement of Pearl Mary's flock, and Billy had not forgotten that conclusion which he declared was at the root of all success in the hen business. This year they could have but a comparatively small kitchen garden; but they hired a pair of oxen and a heavy plow, and scratched the soil between the standing stumps on the uncleared part of the cove, sufficiently to put in field corn, planting a big patch which they hoped would feed all the chicks they could raise and keep over the next Winter.

The young folks and Mr. Herron had worked hard the year before, but this second season—the first on their own land—saw their efforts redoubled. Aside from raising vegetables for their own use, they did little but supply their trade for tomato and cabbage plants out of the hotbed, sell some tomatoes during the Summer, and reap a fine harvest of scallions and onions off the black soil of the new garden. The sets they had saved were planted in late March, and in May they began to ship the scallions. They sold thirty dollars' worth then, and later sent twenty-four dollars' worth to market from the main onion bed. Altogether from the onion patches that season they took in \$190; but, considering the size of the piece planted, the crop was nearly twice as heavy as that of the previous year.

The forest mold and wood ashes made a rich soil for almost any vegetable, and everything they planted, save turnips, grew well in it. Billy tried late carrots that season, instead of turnips, and \$42 worth were sold in October and November. With more than \$60 for tomato and cabbage plants, and some \$30 for ripe tomatoes which they shipped to the fancy grocer who had bought Granny's preserved peaches the previous Fall, the income from

the farm that season amounted to about \$350. This is without taking into consideration the field of yellow corn that grew in broken rows between the stumps of the uncleared portion of the cove. But this corn was not to be sold. It was a heavy yielding variety, and grew so rank that they had to cut the tops off, shoulder high, to ripen the ears properly.

The Herrons saw a good deal of Louise Van Coe that season. As it was not so easy to drive around through the Sowersby lane and up to the bungalow in that way, she got into the habit of walking up through the fields and across the creek at the stepping-stones—and the exercise did her good. Pearl Mary was always too busy to go down to see her, and Miss Van Coe really was interested in the Herrons and their affairs. Besides, the Van Coes depended a good deal upon the Herrons' garden for their own vegetables. Mr. Van Coe had engaged a high-priced gardener at the beginning of the season, but the man had proved independable, and the banker had discharged him. Billy, or Jack, went down once a week and tried to keep the garden at the Van Coe place in some kind of shape. The fruit was good that year, but everything else about the place that would naturally have come under a gardener's care, Mr. Van Coe declared was unsatisfactory. It was out of this dissatisfaction that a scheme was evolved by Miss Louise that was destined to affect the Herrons considerably—especially Billy. But of this anon.

The harvest occupied the entire attention of the Herron brothers for a time. The corn was off in September, and they shocked it on the northern sidehill behind the house, where they had managed to build a log barn and a crib at odd times during the Summer. Meanwhile, the remaining stumps, oil-fed, had been seasoning through the hot months; for two weeks a thick cloud of smoke rose from the cove, adding to the density of the Fall haze above the mountain-top. The Herrons watched these fires day and night, for there was danger of starting a general conflagration in the timber; but no accident of this sort happened. The stumps were all destroyed, or torn out, and before snow stopped the work that Fall, two acres and a half of their little farm was in workable condition for the next year's crops. Suc-

cess had crowned their efforts in many ways; but they faced the Winter in more straightened financial condition than even the year before.

As agreed, they had paid Mr. Mendon \$36 interest on the mortgage. Whether they paid the non-interest bearing thousand dollars in equal yearly installments, or not, did not break their contract; and this first year they could not afford to pay off a cent of that debt. This fact was not what troubled Billy, however. It was still their daily needs—clothing, the food for the table, and other household necessities—that kept him on the anxious seat.

In the Fall the chickens had begun to pay, and that was all that saved them from bankruptcy, Billy declared. In October Pearl Mary counted 42 laying pullets, beside the small flock of yearlings she had wintered. Billy had not allowed her to kill all the cockerels for broilers. Several of the best from the early hatchings, as they were pure breed, sold for \$4 each to the very dealer they had bought the eggs from. In exchange Billy bought two new roosters that Fall, keeping Cap'n Jinks, for he was a vigorous and handsome bird.

They had managed during the season to square up with Mr. Short, but now Billy deliberately ran into debt again with this good-natured neighbor, because of the great stacks of corn fodder that the stump piece had yielded. Short himself urged the thing, and both the Herrons saw that it would be a wise move on their part. They bought from Short a pair of yearlings that were well matched in size if not in color, and would in time make a splendid yoke of steers. The boys had learned from observation that, on land that had to be cleared, a team of oxen was more valuable than draught horses.

In addition, Mr. Short had a cow that would come in fresh about March, and which he was willing to sell cheap. The log barn was warm and roomy enough for these creatures, and the cow would supply the family with milk and butter for several months, the corn fodder could be put to proper use, and the value of the manure from the stable would be considerable. So they

shouldered this additional debt and struggled on in their usual cheerful manner.

But Billy would scarcely have dared contemplate this new burden had it not been for Louise Van Coe's scheme. She had become deeply interested in gardening and plant culture during her acquaintance with the Herrons. Her father never refused to advance anything her heart was set upon, no matter how visionary it might be, and he did not balk at this. And the idea was that the Van Coes should build a hothouse and that Billy Herron should run it for them, and take charge of their grounds as well, in the Summer.

Both Jack and Pearl Mary were opposed to the idea at first, but Billy contemplated it seriously—and for more than one reason. In the first place, the work would be exactly in his line—it was the branch of agriculture that he was the best fitted for. He could never, like Jack, do a man's work on the farm. Their own place would be running smoothly without much of his personal assistance the next season, and Billy had long desired just the experience he could get by working in a hothouse.

All he could agree to do was to have an oversight of the Van Coe place in Summer; a more vigorous man must do the hard work. But in the Winter Billy knew he could learn to take full charge of the greenhouse. Mr. Van Coe had the excavation for the house begun the day after Billy agreed to the arrangement, and, while the house was being built, and the heating plant established and proven by the manufacturers, Billy spent the time working for a greenhouse man near the city. This occupied his time during December and January, and he was only at home on Sundays; but he earned fifty dollars a month, and showed such aptitude for the business that the nurseryman would gladly have raised his pay and given him a steady position if he would have stayed.

In relating these things, however, we have gone somewhat ahead of our story; there had been many happenings that the Herrons considered important before the end of their first year on the mountain farm. They were much better prepared for Winter than when they came into the new house. Billy had

bought the promised range, and the oil stove was only used in Summer. The spring had been dug deeper, walled up properly, and the water piped into the house. That Winter Jack got out the posts for the porch which they proposed to build all around the bungalow, and he felled sufficient good timber, and carted it with Mr. Short's team to the mill, to pay for the floor planks and the rest of the mill stuff.

It was in the Fall, too, that Harry showed up again. He was a migratory fowl, and was now bound south for the Winter. Billy's fear of him must have been suspected by the fellow, and he took advantage of it. He refused to admit that he knew anything about Pearl Mary, or that he understood why Mr. Herron should seem to recall his identity when the unfortunate gentleman remembered so little else of the past. But that the man with the roan mustache held the key to the mystery of Pearl Mary's parentage Billy was convinced.

The fellow became the greatest burden the young man had upon his mind. Had he dared to, Billy would have paid him to keep away from the place. But, even had he possessed the money, he would have feared to start such a game; the tramp would have bled him without conscience, Billy knew.

'And he could not drive him away because Pearl Mary seemed to have a certain fondness for the ne'er-do-well. This fact puzzled and troubled Billy a good deal, too. He wondered if, by chance, the girl suspected that the tramp was connected with her early history. In truth, Billy Herron was in mental torment all the time that Harry lingered in the neighborhood, and when the fellow started on, he devoutly hoped that they would never see him again.

CHAPTER XX.

UNCLE CALVERT.

Since the final estrangement of Uncle Calvert and the young Herrons, the only communication between the families had been carried on by a desultory correspondence of Aunt Nannie and Aunt Calvert. The young people naturally felt bitterly towards their maternal uncle, and seldom spoke of him. Billy himself had vowed never to call on him for assistance, no matter in what straits the family was placed; and he was happy when they pulled through their second Winter at the Herron Nest without its being necessary to look to anybody for help.

However, some knowledge of the progress of the Herrons in their undertaking had reached the Calverts, for in a roundabout way Billy learned that their uncle frequently expressed his amazement that his nephews' "crazy" idea had not proven disastrous. Evidently Mr. Calvert was changing his opinion regarding Billy's judgment. But there was no attempt made to span the breach between the two families at this time.

Billy came home and took hold of Mr. Van Coe's greenhouse about the time that their own hotbeds were put in shape. A part of the money he had earned was expended in buying new sash and the Herrons started this season with three times the area of hotbeds that they had previously owned. They had obtained a contract from a seedhouse for pot-grown tomato plants, and when the time came for the potting and "hardening off" of the plants in the cold frames, Pearl Mary took almost entire charge of that branch of the work. This, in addition to the care she gave the poultry, and this Spring she hatched nearly five hundred chicks.

"The wooden hen for ours after this, Sis," Billy assured her. "If we are blessed this year as we have been in the past, we can afford to buy, or build, incubators, and next year begin hatching at a wholesale rate. Jack will plant corn on three acres of upland.

we'll build another crib, and you can consider yourself launched in as good a paying poultry business as there is in this part of the State."

Billy's attempt at celery raising the year before had encouraged him to go in somewhat heavily for this crop, and celery, onions and tomatoes bulked big on the mountain farm that year. He did not have to neglect Mr. Van Coe's work, and, under his advice, the banker's estate became one of the "show places" of the town that very first season. Before the farm work really began, however, the two boys and their father built the wide porch all around the bungalow. The back part was enclosed for a Summer kitchen, and the improvement in the appearance of the structure from the front was really remarkable.

"Why, I wouldn't exchange the bungalow for Mr. Van Coe's house!" declared Pearl Mary. "We've got a home now that we need not be ashamed of."

There was a nice heifer calf born in March, and the mother cow came in fresh and was a great help to them. The cattle could be turned out on the upper pastures along the creek, when the Summer came, and the cost of keeping them until Fall was practically nothing.

Their interests were widening, too, for they had made friends among the neighboring farmers, as well as in the village; they still remained a particularly self-centered family in that their social desires were satisfied in each other. And it was Pearl Mary that really served to knit the family so closely together. She was a comfort to Granny, a necessity to Aunt Nannie, and her oversight of Mr. Herron was unwearying. To the boys she continued the most inspiring motive of their daily lives. The trio had faithfully kept the compact to hide from the old folks the fact that Pearl Mary knew she was not blood-kin to them. Now, she never seemed unhappy, or moody, over the fact of her unknown origin. Nor did Jack display any of the gloom of spirit that had, for a time, clouded his existence. Since that first Christmas Eve at the Herron Nest, the big fellow had been his old-time smiling, if quiet, self. No more did he allow Envy to disturb the serenity of his temper; if Pearl Mary had chosen

Billy instead of him, he was determined to subtract no atom from the sum total of their happiness by revealing his own pain and disappointment.

Not that there was any particular display of affection between the girl and Billy; their confidence in, and sympathy for, each other never seemed to have been shaken—that was all. Their intercourse merely remained unembarrassed after Pearl Mary's discovery that they were not really brother and sister; but Jack could never forget for a moment that the beautiful girl was not of his blood. His self-restraint had rounded out and strengthened Jack's character wonderfully during these months; the rather abrupt, thoughtless boy had become a quiet, assured man.

Pearl Mary's own improvement had been marked. Physically she was a beautiful girl, and had been such before; but her character had become softened and she was less tempestuous. If she still felt keenly the fact that her parentage was unknown, she made no outward sign. Yet Billy began to suspect that time had cured that hurt in the girl's soul not at all.

Harry, the mysterious wanderer, turned up like the proverbial bad penny this Spring, as usual. Pearl Mary's interest in the fellow seemed more pronounced than ever before. Jack believed that her kindness to the tramp sprang from the fact that he had been the means of saving Billy from injury; but Billy himself had quite another idea regarding the girl's attitude toward the fellow. He suspected that Pearl Mary knew that Harry was aware of the mystery in her life and could explain it. He did all he could do to keep the tramp and Pearl Mary apart while the former lingered in the vicinity. The fellow was as bad as a dynamite bomb; Billy expected an explosion in the family at almost any moment while he remained on the place.

And from watching the tramp and Pearl Mary, Billy's eyes began to be opened to the real attitude towards each other of the girl and Jack. One evening when he came up from the Van Coe place and he and Jack were having their usual talk about the work before supper, Pearl Mary came from the hen runs with her basket of eggs and joined Jack at the latter turned

from his brother, who was resting upon a log in the shade. The girl did not observe the latter, and Billy watched the two unnoticed, as they stopped in the path to speak to one another. It was not what they said; some simple question and answer only passed between them. Jack smiled upon her, his handsome, open face aglow, his eyes shining as they always did when he turned his gaze in her direction. But when she had answered him and the big fellow made off to perform some small task she had requested, Billy suddenly had a revelation—he made a discovery that really startled him.

The girl did not move when Jack left her, but she looked after him, and there flashed into her face an expression that was illuminating to Billy's mind. He saw something in her eyes—something in her smile—something of revealed glory in her pure countenance that was like the cleaving open of the curtains of her soul! The young man was staggered for a moment by this chance glimpse into the holy of holies of the girl's being. It was a full minute before he could speak. She had turned away then toward the house.

"Pearl Mary! Sister!"

She started guiltily. The crimson flamed instantly from the low neckband of her simple gown to the hair that curled so prettily about her temples.

"Billy!" she whispered. "Are *you* here?"

He beckoned her, and she slowly set down the basket she was carrying and came toward him. As she approached, there must have been that in his face which betrayed his suddenly acquired knowledge of her secret. She had put her hands behind her back and tried to look pertly down at him; but Billy's steady gaze broke down her coquetry. Suddenly she covered her blazing face with her hands and would have run from him had not Billy risen quickly and firmly seized her slender wrists.

"Dear!" he said, huskily, "look at me!" She could not, and shook her head obstinately. "Pearl Mary, you've had a secret from me—you have hidden it from your pal! How could you! how could you!" he cried.

With tender force, he drew her hands down and uncovered

her face. The blue eyes were swimming with tears; but the sweet lips were all tremble with a smile that she could not control.

"You love him!" cried Billy.

She gave him an eloquent look, then broke away and ran, leaving Billy standing with arms outstretched, his own face working strangely.

It was at this time that the Herrons—the younger members of the family, at least—were surprised beyond expression one afternoon to see a strange carriage drive up the Sowersbys' lane. The driver got down and opened their gate, and the vehicle steadily mounted the rise toward the bungalow. Visitors—at least, those who came in livery turnouts from the city—were not common at the Herron Nest.

"Thunder!" gasped Jack, first to admit the wonder. "It's Uncle Calvert!"

It was indeed the red-faced, fleshy relative for whom neither Jack nor Billy possessed any fondness. But they could not turn their backs upon him and refuse to greet him when he came to their own door. But their welcome was not exactly enthusiastic!

"Hem! It's not very easy to get to this place," grumbled Uncle Calvert. "You certainly *have* shut yourselves away from everybody up here."

"It doesn't seem to do us much good," muttered Jack; but Billy could not be discourteous to even so unwelcome a guest.

"I am sorry if you found it difficult to find us," he said. "Now that you have arrived, will you come into the house, Uncle Calvert?"

"No. I can speak to you here as well—quite as well," declared his relative, but apparently somewhat uncertain how to approach the object that had brought him to the Heron Nest. He gazed around upon the pleasant prospect, and then back at the wide veranda with the comfortable rustic seats upon it, at the scrim curtains Pearl Mary had looped back with big, cherry-colored bows at the windows, and at the other signs of comfort about the place. There was a patch of lawn before the door (Billy had seeded it down the year previous) and Aunt Nannie had already

made a little garden at the foot of each veranda post where climbing plants were to be set in May. The sweet peas were already showing above the soil. Altogether the Heron Nest, and its surroundings, made an attractive picture. "Dear, dear!" said Uncle Calvert, with an air of saying it against his will, "this really is a remarkably pretty place. . . . And you own it, young man?"

"We are going to own it in time; we hold the deeds now," said Billy, quietly. "It will begin to pay us this year."

"Hem!" commented Uncle Calvert. "Well, I drove out because Mrs. Calvert—hem!—your aunt, I mean, thought that perhaps you would take Veronica for a while. Of course," he hastened to add, "we would expect to pay her board."

"I do not think that we could accommodate her. She would not like it here," said Billy bluntly.

"You don't understand," Mr. Calvert said. There seemed to be something troubling his throat, for he cleared it repeatedly as he spoke, and he did not often look at Billy. "She—she wouldn't expect the accommodations she'd get at a hotel. She aint been well lately. She's like my half-sister, Rose—you've heard me speak of Rose? Veronica's lived indoors too much, the doctors say. You know, Dr. Midgely has always attended our family—just as he used to attend your folks, Billy. He was with your mother when she died," added the man, thoughtfully.

Billy, surprised and puzzled, waited for him to continue.

"Midgely says Veronica needs out-of-door life. She needs to rough it. She's like a hothouse plant, he says. She—she's got a bad cough, and it worries her mother a whole lot. Now, Midgely heard of how you folks were situated out here, and he tells me it is just the place for Veronica. She mustn't have any babyin'; her mother's done too much of that—not that I blame her," added Uncle Calvert, hastily. "She's our only child, you know."

Billy suddenly had a revelation of what the man meant—of how he felt. He suspected that Veronica was threatened with serious trouble, and he saw that Uncle Calvert was greatly shaken by his daughter's peril. Nothing less would have brought him so humbly to the Herron's door. But Billy was just. He knew what Veronica Calvert was, and he knew that the burden of her being

here would fall upon other shoulders than his own. Besides, it had been Veronica who so cruelly shocked Pearl Mary with the revelation of her unknown parentage.

Billy turned and saw his sister coming tripping down the path from the poultry runs, swinging her sunbonnet by its strings. He called to her, and not until she reached him did she look up and recognize Uncle Calvert. Her face paled and she stared from the man in the carriage to Billy, in sudden fear. Uncle Calvert was associated in her mind with that terrible day when he had so unkindly confirmed his daughter's story.

"What—what is it, Billy?" she gasped, expecting nothing but evil from the unexpected visit.

Billy took her hand and pressed it soothingly. "Nothing to be frightened about, dear," he said. "Uncle Calvert is in trouble. He has come to us to help him." His uncle winced at this plain statement of the case; but it was true, and he looked away. He was too disturbed to try and put the matter as though it were *he* who were doing the favor, as would have been his usual way. "Veronica is ill; Dr. Midgely suggests that she come out here and live for a while, that she may be built up—just as *you* have been built up, sister mine."

"Oh!" ejaculated Pearl Mary, casting another glance at the anxious man in the carriage.

"Of—of course," interposed Uncle Calvert, clearing his throat again, "We will pay whatever is right for her board and lodging."

"That is not the point, sir," Billy returned, quietly. "It is Pearl Mary who must decide this. The trouble of having Veronica here—if it is a trouble at all—must fall upon my sister's shoulders. She will be obliged to share her room with Veronica, and Granny is too infirm now to take any additional burden upon herself. Pearl Mary runs the house," and Billy smiled at her, approvingly.

"I—I hope nothing I may have said in the past will influence Mary now," urged Uncle Calvert, with painful hesitation. "This—this is a very serious matter. I—I may say it—it's life or death for my daughter!" He could scarcely control his voice; Billy and

Pearl Mary had never seen Uncle Calvert moved in this way before. "The doctor says her mother must not go with her; she must 'rough it' by herself; and there is no other place, and no one else we know, where we can trust her."

The ending of the speech was pitiful. Pearl Mary gave Billy a swift glance, saw what was written in *his* countenance, and turned to the anxious man with a smile dawning in her own pretty face.

"Of course, let Veronica come!" she exclaimed. "We can make shift to care for her somehow—if she doesn't expect too much. I'll see Granny about it," and she whisked into the house.

Uncle Calvert cleared his throat and tried to recover his usual pompous manner. He was not too generous in the offer he made Billy for his daughter's board at the bungalow; he had made concessions enough for one day!

While they talked Harry, the tramp, slouched around the corner of the house and idly approached the carriage. While he lingered at the Herron place the fellow kept himself looking fairly neat and trim. It was always his way to keep closely shaven, and he carried a shaving kit in his ragged clothes whether he possessed a penny or not! He stared at Uncle Calvert, and once or twice that gentleman's gaze wandered to the tramp's face, lingering there for a moment with what seemed to be a puzzled expression of countenance. Finally, Pearl Mary came out to say that Granny and Aunt Nannie were agreed that they could make Veronica comfortable. Uncle Calvert said she should come at once, and was driving away, when he looked again at the lingering Harry. The latter stared at the visitor in return and, later, showed much curiosity regarding Billy's wealthy relative. He asked all about Mr. Calvert, his business, and where he lived.

"If you paid less attention to other people's affairs, Harry, and settled down to some business of your own, you might yet amount to something in the world," remarked the disgusted Billy.

"But gee! that would be work," exclaimed the tramp, grinning.

CHAPTER XXI.

"THE FAT'S IN THE FIRE!"

Beside the larger number of tomato plants the Herrons raised for the market that Spring, they had plenty to set on their own patch. And this tomato garden looked like a vineyard from a distance, especially while the plants were small. Billy carried out the ideas he had evolved during their first season, and this year they set a dozen long rows of strong posts, running north and south, and strung wires to them to which the plants, as they grew, were securely tied. Billy had likewise discovered that tomatoes could be grown in succession without any trouble. As long as the ground was properly enriched with compost each season the posts and wires did not have to be moved.

It took regular attention for some weeks to keep the plants properly pruned tied to these trellises, but the returns repaid the outlay of time. Billy arrived this year at the pinnacle of his desires in tomato raising; he saw a dollar profit from a plant! It was brought about by the careful selection of the strain of seed, by proper cultivation and attention, and last but not least, by wise marketing of the crop.

When the tomatoes began to ripen he purchased crates and baskets, stenciled them with the legend: "Heron Nest Farm, Medway, N. Y." and packed his fruit with as way, N. Y.", and packed his fruit with as much care as is given to much care as is given to hothouse-grown tomatoes. And there is one thing sure; hothouse-grown tomatoes were never like these of Billy Herron's, and the grower who produces his tomatoes out of doors will always have the call over forced fruit. The latter does not possess the flavor. Billy never packed a cracked tomato, and never sent one to market that was not perfect in shape and promised to ripen evenly. And the returns, even after the commission merchant and the railroad

had taken their profits, bulked big on the ledger of the family income for that season.

Before the tomatoes were set out, however, Veronica Calvert came to the Heron Nest. Most girls who had been as brutally frank as Veronica would have shown some diffidence in their manner; but she quite ignored her treatment of Pearl Mary the last time she had chanced to meet her, and began at once to act toward her as she was in the habit of treating her mother and the servants at home. It made Jack angry to hear and see the girl but Pearl Mary, seeing how wan and ill the girl really appeared, merely laughed at her. Dr. Midgely had written a letter to Billy in which he begged the Herrons to ignore her overbearing ways, and to make her wait on herself and live out of doors as much as possible; so after the first week or two, when she found that Pearl Mary would not run to her beck and call, and that she could not go home again whether she liked the place, or not, Veronica really began to behave like a more reasonable human being.

Sheer loneliness drove the spoiled girl out of doors for Pearl Mary's society. The latter was all day engaged with her chickens and light tasks in the garden, and Veronica could not help but falling in love with the broods of downy, yellow chicks. Pearl Mary's flocks, separated in their various runs and pens, were really a pretty sight. The poultry being all purebred and of one variety, a person who was no chicken fancier could not help being attracted by the sight. A branch pipe from the spring kept a tiny stream of fresh water flowing through the henyard troughs at all times in Summer, although no muddy spots were allowed in the enclosures in which the fowl might soil their feathers. In Winter this water supply was cut off, for the pipe was merely laid on top of the ground; the poultry was supplied several times a day with tepid water in cold weather.

Pearl Mary could use some of the eggs from her first year's hens for hatching purposes now, and she found them fertile and the chicks hatched from them quite as strong, and as true to name and strain, as those obtained from the eggs she bought. This was a considerable saving, and she looked forward to selling eggs her-

self for hatching purposes the next season. In spite of the corn Jack raised and the roots and garden stuff, the feed for the poultry was a serious item of expense. Billy declared, however, that as fast as they could afford to, they would clear some of the uplands of the farm and raise wheat; the land there looked promising for that purpose. They ground meat and bone that they secured at the village butcher's, and Billy brought home much of the lawn clippings from Mr. Van Coe's (there was a great deal of clover in his lawn) which they dried and stored to mix in the "mash" on which they fed the poultry at least once a day in Winter.

"A crop full of warm mash, and a warm roosting house, in cold weather, is safer than a dry feed and a draughty roost," was one of Billy's axioms. And the rule certainly kept Pearl Mary's hens laying when those of other poultry raisers in the neighborhood had given up the struggle to supply the matutinal egg in frosty weather.

In a few weeks Veronica Calvert had become so much interested in Pearl Mary's work, and her plans for the future, that she did not have to be driven out of doors as was first the case. She took upon herself some of the lighter duties to relieve the other girl, and as she forgot herself and imitated the busy existence of the young Herrons, she correspondingly improved. Her cheeks began to call up a little color, her eyes grew brighter, her step was no longer languid, and she forgot to cough!

But Jack could not evince any fondness for her. It must be confessed that the big fellow was a good deal "set" in his ways. With many people of Jack Herron's temperament the virtue of consistency is carried to a fault. He was slow to acknowledge that Veronica Calvert could ever be aught but the silly, selfish girl she had been when she came to live in the Heron Nest.

Jack was helping Billy transplant sets from the greenhouse to the plant beds in the lawns about the Van Coe house one day, when he voiced his dislike for their cousin, adding: "And the way she tries to boss Pearl Mary around is not only absurd, but it gets me mad, Billy! I tell you frankly, I'd never have let her come to live with us if I'd been you."

"Pearl Mary made the decision," said Billy, quietly. "And I'm

proud of her for having done so. She had much against Uncle Calvert, and I should not have blamed her if she had refused."

"Well, you oughtn't to have put it up to her at all," growled Jack. "You might have known what she would have done. She knew that you would be disappointed in her if she didn't show the disposition of an angel——"

Billy laughed. "I don't just know what brand of disposition that is, Jack, and I doubt if you do, either. Most angels we read about in the Scriptures are merely messengers of the Almighty, and I doubt if they begin to have the vexations and disappointments that rasp the disposition of us poor mortals. . . . Pearl Mary is a sweet girl, I grant you, and I am proud of her; but I don't think she is wholly perfect."

Jack fairly glared at him. "You certainly astonish me, Billy!" he ejaculated. But before he could go farther Louise Van Coe approached to ask Billy a question pertaining to his work. The latter went to her at once, and Jack, on his knees in the flower-bed, could not help watching the couple as they stood out of earshot, but where he could see the play of their features plainly.

Miss Van Coe was never languid in Billy's presence. She was deeply interested in the hothouse work and in the gardening, and her father allowed her to do just as she pleased in the government of the work young Herron was conducting. Although she had been quite a "young lady" when the Herrons had first made her acquaintance, she was only a few months older than Billy himself. Even Jack observed that an interest in life had marvelously improved the banker's daughter.

She stood now talking with his brother, as frankly as she would have to any man of her own social world—there was nothing patronizing in her manner. Indeed, if anything, she seemed to look to Billy for approval, and his treatment of her was much different from the attitude he bore toward Pearl Mary, or Veronica Calvert. As they talked, Jack saw the color come and go very prettily in Louise Van Coe's cheeks, and her eyes darted glances at her father's gardener that even to Jack's rather slow comprehension revealed something that he had never dreamed of before!

Jack dropped the trowel he was using, and went back into the greenhouse, and there Billy found him after a few minutes. The big fellow was fairly pale, his eyes blazed, and he looked at his brother with a mixture of amazement and suspicion that the latter could not ignore.

"Hullo, old boy! what's the trouble?" asked Billy, smiling.

Jack's black eyes sparkled in a way that his brother had seldom noted of late. Jack's sudden flashes of temper were so infrequent now, that the whole family had almost forgotten them. The young man controlled his voice, however, when he spoke:

"Billy, I just saw you with Miss Van Coe. I—I could not help watching you two—you were right before me where I was at work."

The tone of accusation he used was perhaps the reason that Billy flushed a little; but the latter's only comment was:

"Well, Jack?"

"You—you two are friendly—more friendly than *you* have any right to be, Billy, with any girl but one."

His brother looked steadily at him. The color died out of his face, and then came back again in a flood. But Billy held his own temper in perfect control.

"Who is that one?" he asked Jack, curtly.

"You ask me that?" cried the big fellow, taking an involuntary step toward his brother. "How can you! How can you forget Mary?"

"I don't," denied Billy. He was calm now, and the angry red began to recede from his cheeks again. "Pearl Mary is my sister——".

"You know you are more than a brother to her, Billy! And she has been more to you than sister——"

"Stop!" Billy's command and gesture silenced the big fellow in spite of his anger. "Pearl Mary is my dear, dear sister. She and I understand each other perfectly, Jack. It is *you* that labor under a delusion."

"Wha—What do you mean?" murmured Jack. "Miss Van Coe——"

"We are not discussing Miss Louise. At least, we have no

right to bring her name into any such discussion," said Billy, quickly. "But Pearl Mary——"

"Well?" demanded Jack, doggedly.

Billy suddenly laughed. He caught his brother by both shoulders and gave him a little shake.

"Is *that* the trouble, Jackie-boy?" he cried. "How blind I have been!" Then he looked deep into his brother's eyes, out of which the fire had gone now. He put his lips close to the big fellow's ear, and his own arms slipped around his shoulders and folded Jack close to him in boyish embrace, while he whispered:

"Jack! Jack! You love her!"

The other trembled; but in a moment he seized Billy's wrists, drawing down his hands to hold the slighter fellow off from him.

"Yes," Jack said, firmly, "I love her. I've loved her, I guess, ever since we were kiddies together. But I've played fair, Billy. I've never tried to take advantage of *you*—not that I *could*, I suppose, for Pearl Mary——"

"Remains, as she always has been, my dear, dear sister," said Billy, with eyes that were tear-filled, but which looked his brother frankly in the face. "Jack, my dear fellow! you have been in error. And so have I, for that matter. I did not know—not for sure—how you felt; I did not imagine for an instant the strength of your regard for her. But, dear boy, if you love her, why in heaven's name don't you win her? Why do you wait longer?"

"But you!" gasped Jack, pale to his lips under the shock of the discovery.

"I tell you I am her brother—and I should be nothing more to Pearl Mary in any case. I am not the sort of a man who appeals to a romantic nature like hers. I tell you, Jack, that there isn't a shadow of feeling between Pearl Mary and me that should hold you from trying to win her."

"Billy! Billy! do you mean it?" The cry touched the other as deeply as anything had ever stirred his heart before. The tears overflowed his eyes, and in a choking voice, as he beat his brother on the back with both arms around him again, Billy replied:

"Ask her! ask her, you dear old fellow! And if I'm any kind of a prophet at all, she will not need to be coaxed!"

And in the general hilarity of that occasion Jack forgot entirely to probe any deeper into his brother's mind regarding Louise Van Coe.

The big fellow's outlook upon life was so entirely changed by this revelation that it was several days before he could adjust himself to the facts. He had lived for months a life of severe repression. That he had grown calmly to view the sympathetic understanding between his brother and Pearl Mary was no proof that the wound in his heart had been healed by time. His loyalty to the brother he so loved, and his desire never to mar Pearl Mary's happiness were the factors that had enabled the big fellow to hide his pain.

But one evening she came singing down the hemlock aisles behind the bungalow, from the spring where she had been to shut off the flow of water to the poultry yards for the night, and just at the edge of the wood, Jack stood before her.

"Oh!" gasped Pearl Mary. She glanced timidly about. There was a thicket on either side. She looked down and the color flooded into her face; then she covered the blushes with her hands.

Jack slowly, firmly, drew the hands down, holding both in one of his own big brown ones, and with his thumb and forefinger, turned her flower-like face up to his own. His black eyes drank deep of the heaven-blue pools of her own orbs. She sighed and fluttered nearer him, charmed yet half tempted to flee again.

"I love you! I love you, Pearl Mary! Love you! love you!" he whispered again and again, and with an emotion that physically shook him. But he did not seek to enfold her in his arms until she should freely, frankly give herself to him.

And at the moment—as she raised her face of her own volition to look at him—as her lips parted to whisper the permission his heart hungered for—came the hateful interruption. The girl started back from him.

"Sh!" she warned. "There's father and—and Harry."

The murmur of the wanderer's voice came to them plainly. Pearl Mary slipped by him and Jack must, perforce, follow her down the hill. Mr. Herron and the tramp, who was just then

idling again in the neighborhood, stood at the corner of the poultry run.

The old gentleman smiled upon the girl tenderly as she approached. He was most frequently silent; but the girl always brought to his patient, tired face that same loving smile of confidence. Mr. Herron glanced now at the rough-looking fellow who was grinning appreciatively on Pearl Mary, and Jack saw a sudden light of intelligence flash athwart his father's face. As Pearl Mary came near, Mr. Herron reached forth and took her hand in his, and said, in a manner quite different from his ordinary way:

"Hasn't she grown? Isn't she pretty? Ah! you didn't dream she'd be like this when you brought her to our door so long ago—did you? No, no! who would have expected that little, helpless, wailing baby to grow like *this*?"

He patted her hand and smiled. The expression of his countenance slowly faded while his startled audience remained transfixed by his words. Jack was horrified; Pearl Mary's face blanched and she looked in something like terror from the unfortunate gentleman to the blowsy, disreputable tramp; the latter shrank back—his lips mumbled, but he uttered no audible word.

Mr. Herron, unconscious of what he had done, still patted the girl's hand. He started toward the house and Pearl Mary, perforce, must accompany him. She walked with her head down, slowly, without buoyancy or spirit in her carriage—as though Youth and Hope had both been stricken in her soul. She drooped like an old woman.

The tramp gasped, rubbed the back of his wrist across his lips, and looked up sidewise at Jack. His first audible word was an oath.

"The fat *is* in the fire!" he added.

But Jack scarcely heard him. He walked away

CHAPTER XXII.

NO.

Under the stars that night, pacing back and forth in the barnyard, or sitting side by side on the great oak log that lay there, the brothers thrashed the thing out for hours. And their conclusion was this: Harry must be made to tell what he knew. Twice their father had seemed to have a flickering remembrance of that old, old time when Pearl Mary was brought a helpless infant to their door. He might, or he might not ever be able to relate the facts connected therewith, clearly and intelligently. But the tramp held the key to the whole mystery.

"As long as I only knew this," Billy said, gravely, "I did not see the wisdom of trying to get out of the fellow whatever he knows. But it is different now. Good, or bad—whatever the story may be—Pearl Mary will never be satisfied—will never be happy again, indeed—until she knows his story."

"And will she then?" cried Jack, racked by the thought of the pain he knew the girl was bearing alone.

"That we cannot tell."

"But the scoundrel may lie about it."

"He may."

"Billy! what shall we do? How get at the truth? How be *sure* that the story Harry relates to us is the true explanation of the mystery?"

"You ask me questions that I cannot answer," returned his brother. "I see no other move in this matter. If Harry can be made to speak we must use our judgment then as to the acceptance of his statement as true."

But the mysterious tramp had gone away from the farm immediately after the incident related in the last chapter. He did not return the next day. A week passed with no news of him, although Billy himself went to the village and tried to learn where he had gone. But Harry seemed to have dropped out of

their lives as he always did when he was ready to go on one of his objectless journeys—without a word, and without leaving a clue as to his route or destination.

Billy had to go to his sister with this report. She bore the blow bravely; but her spirits were quenched. She was no longer the happy, laughing, contented girl that she had been. And she put Jack firmly away from her, too. She avoided him as she had before, but now for another reason. There was nothing coquetish in her manner; she was not postponing a happiness that, even before this wretched secret was divulged, she had been almost afraid to grasp!

"I will not listen to you, Jack," she told him, with a firmness and with a steadiness of purpose that he had not dreamed was underlying in her character. "I should not have encouraged you. Once I would not have done so; and I believed then that you felt the difference between us, too—the gulf that divides me from you all who have been so kind and loving to *me*, a nameless nobody! No! The loving, tender care of your mother, and of Granny and Aunt Nannie, showered on a helpless child whose own parents were, perhaps, so vile and low that they forsook her—Oh, Jack! can't you understand? Suppose that terrible man were my own father? Suppose my unknown mother—God forgive me for saying it!—was only a wanderer upon the earth like Harry himself? Can't you feel for me? Can't you realize my position? Sometime, if I married you, I might shame you—all the mystery might be revealed and you—you—would be stained with the mire out of which I had crawled to ruin you!"

"I won't listen to you!" cried her lover. "You have no right to speak of yourself so. And what matters it who your parents were? I do not know them, nor do you. We have nothing to do with the past; let the dead bury their dead! I want you, and you only!" declared the big fellow, fiercely, "and I'll wait for you till you change your mind and see this thing a right. Meanwhile you are only making both our hearts sore, Pearl Mary."

But she would not listen. As before the trio kept this new secret from the other members of the family. But it was very, very hard to do this, for the minds of Jack, and Billy, and Pearl

Mary, were miserable indeed. They scarcely put heart into their work, and had not the running of the farm been almost mechanical now, many important things would have been neglected. While their spirits were so low and their minds so torn by anxiety, the greatest material success crowned their efforts.

In August they harvested their finest crop of onions. They had planted in all nearly two acres, and the well-enriched, black soil yielded almost 600 bushels to the acre—a bumper harvest indeed. From the proceeds of the sale of the onions and the early tomatoes, they were able to pay their debt to Mr. Short, satisfy the tax claims on the farm, pay the interest on the mortgage, and give their friend, Mr. Mendon, five hundred dollars in settlement of half the thousand dollar note he held against them.

Billy dared do this because of the promise of their later harvest. The outlook for the celery was most encouraging and more than half of the tomato crop was yet to be gathered. They would have a large amount of roots in the Fall, too, and Billy purchased some good breeding pigs and two more head of young stock to help eat up the surplus during the Winter. The corn on the uplands was thriving. Indeed, everything about the Heron Nest, save the hearts of the trio whose fortunes we have been particularly following, was in better state than ever before. The future promised all manner of material success; but Billy, and Jack, and Pearl Mary—ah! this rosy outlook did not interest them!

Veronica Calvert remained with them through the Summer, and her improvement (both in body and disposition) continued. Her father and mother drove out once a fortnight—usually on a Sunday—to see her; but Dr. Midgely said she must remain at the Heron Nest until cold weather, at least. He did not often see her himself, but Aunt Nannie wrote him regular reports, and one of the boys was usually in town and called on Uncle Calvert, at least once between every pair of visits he made to the mountain farm.

Uncle Calvert's opinion of the wisdom and judgment of the nephews had undergone a pronounced change; they were making money, and Uncle Calvert respected anybody who did that. Beside, the outlook for a great deal of money being made out of

the Heron Nest farm in time, seemed promising. And last, but by no means least, Veronica had confided to her mother and father that Billy Herron seemed to be in high favor with the daughter of Marcus Van Coe, the banker, whose estate Billy superintended.

Mr. Calvert's attitude toward Pearl Mary when he was at the farm was rather puzzling. Veronica had come to like the girl whom once she had refused to call "cousin," immensely; she was always praising Pearl Mary, or quoting her to her parents, and that the girl whose parentage was in doubt had been exceedingly kind to their daughter, the Calverts very well knew. But these facts did not wholly explain the expression of Uncle Calvert's face when he was watching Pearl Mary, and thought himself unobserved. He was most courteous to her, too—almost tender, in fact. It was a mystery that perhaps nobody noticed but Billy and the girl herself. Neither could guess the reason for his evident change of heart, for he was not of a grateful nature, and her kindness to Veronica did not satisfactorily explain the puzzle.

And he was so secretive about it! Billy once caught him looking after his sister with tears actually standing in his eyes and his fat face convulsed with an emotion that would actually have been funny had not young Herron realized that whatever was causing Mr. Calvert such acute misery was no laughing matter for the old man. It could not be because he compared Pearl Mary with Veronica and wished his daughter possessed the abundant health of the former; Veronica was progressing finely at this time.

It was a problem to which there seemed no present answer. However, about this time, Billy came face to face with another enigma which rather put Uncle Calvert's strange actions out of his mind. Billy was in the city on business for Mr. Van Coe, and before returning he went around by Mr. Calvert's office. On the corner nearest to the place of his destination he almost ran into a man who was coming hurriedly towards him. The two dodged each other for a moment or two, as pedestrians sometimes will, and then suddenly Billy got a glimpse of the man's face and he halted stock still, expelling a gasp of amazement as he did so.

The man was oldish, with reddish-gray hair and a heavy roan mustache. He was otherwise cleanly shaven, and there was a smartness about his appearance and attire that did not compare well with his blotched face and narrow, twinkling eyes. His clothing was not only smart, but loud! He wore a spotted vest, tight pants, a frock coat, and a straw hat with a colored band upon it. There was a heavy gilt chain stretched from pocket to pocket across the rather protuberant front of his vest.

The man gave Billy scarcely a look. He hurried on, almost running it seemed, and disappeared around the corner. The amazing familiarity of the fellow's appearance, and yet the fact that we believed it could not possibly be Harry, the tramp, held Billy spellbound for several minutes.

"It never could be him in the world!" muttered young Herron. "Yet what a very strange look he gave me. I could almost have sworn that he winked at me—and his eyes were of the same watery blue as Harry's! But if Harry had struck luck and was dressed up like that fellow, he surely could not have resisted the temptation to stop and tell me all about it. Now—I—wonder!"

He went on to Mr. Calvert's office. His uncle was squeezed into his armchair as usual, before his desk; but he was not in his usual mood. In fact, when Billy came in he seemed in a brown study and the expression on his face was so hopeless, and so sorrowful, that Billy was quite touched by it. He made his presence known by asking:

"Are you sick, Uncle Calvert? What can I do for you?"

The old man started, awoke from his daze, and scowled. "Hem! that you, Billy?" he grunted. "I—I guess I was dreamin'."

"And not a pleasant dream, I take it," said Billy, cheerfully.

The other looked at him closely for a minute, and then said, grumpily:

"Wait till you get to *my* age, Billy Herron. *You* won't have many pleasant dreams, either." And that is all he would say in comment upon his mood. His nephew finally went away quite as much puzzled by his appearance as he had been by the resemblance of the man he met on the nearby corner to Harry, the tramp!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FIRE FIGHT.

There was a good deal of activity about the Van Coe place that Fall, as well farther up the mountain, at the Heron Nest. And Billy was personally interested in the additional hothouse that the banker built, and in the rows and rows of hotbeds that were laid out on the patch in which Billy and his brother had grown their first crop of onions.

In fact, Louise Van Coe was the instigator of these changes and improvements. She had grown so enthusiastic over plant culture that her father had let her have a sum of money and told her she might dabble in the business if she liked. Billy was not only her adviser and superintendent; but he had an interest in the business that the girl was determined to establish; she was anxious to prove to her father that the feminine mind was capable of grasping the intricacies of commerce.

In the greenhouses they proposed to raise pinks and roses; in the hotbeds Billy planted pansy seed in September, hoping to clear out the plants about April, thereafter using the beds to harden off tomato plants which could be started earlier in flats in the greenhouse. This business he kept distinct from that carried on upon the Herron's own place; but Billy knew that Jack would very soon be able to conduct the mountain farm without much help from *him*. What Jack would need up there was a couple of husky hands during the season; Billy had gladly accepted the opportunity offered him by the Van Coes to get into the nursery business in a small way; something bigger might come of it; but he did not, at this time, discuss his plans at home.

Jack's duties kept him so engaged that he could not become morose over Pearl Mary's treatment of him; but he *was* sad. Time did not change the girl's determination. She refused to even discuss the matter. Even Billy's good offices for his brother failed with her.

"Find out who I am, Billy—oh, find that out for me!" she cried, when his insistence finally broke down her self-possession. "Let

me know who my parents were—wicked, or unfortunate! Suppose that awful old man who has been about here so much, should really be my father? Isn't the thought enough to make me hate myself? Oh, I know all that, Billy! I know Jack loves me; and the dear God knows I love him. But his father and mother were too, too good to me for me to do him such an injury as to marry him. Unless I discover my parents, and unless I learn that they were, at least, respectable, I will marry no man! I'll live and die what I am — a girl without a name!"

It was after an early morning talk with his sister which ended in this way, that Billy was engaged about the front of Mr. Van Coe's estate when Louise called his attention to a column of black smoke rising from a point to the east—of the Heron Nest, and farther up on the mountain side. They were watching this smoke cloud grow and Billy was expressing a hope that it was not a fire in the timber, when they were startled by the rattle of wheels and turned to see 'Lias Short driving at his pony's best pace down the road.

"Hello, there, Billy! Jump aboard, an' I'll take ye over. I jest hearn about it."

"Heard about what, Mr. Short?" asked Miss Van Coe.

"Jefers-pelters!" ejaculated 'Lias. "Aint you hearn of it? Sowersby's all afire—barn, an' a house, an' crib! The volunteer fire comp'ny's up there from the village. They'll save the cellar, sure's you're born! They allus do!"

"Oh! I must go, too!" she cried, and Billy helped her into the wagon beside 'Lias before he got in himself.

The tough little pony drew them at a clattering pace along the pike, and up the lane which led directly to the Sowersby house. And they saw much more than smoke before they reached the spot; flames wrapped the entire roof of the farmhouse, and the flying embers had set the barn and other outbuildings afire. The well was quickly sucked dry, and the cisterns were not well supplied with water at this time of year, for there had been more than a month's drought. The neighbors were working like madmen to remove the best of the Sowersbys' furniture from the house, and the horses and stock had been driven into the farther pasture.

Among the workers Billy spied his brother, and the Sowersbys might have been his dearest friends, considering the efforts he was exerting to save their chattels from the fire.

Nothing could save the buildings, however, and there soon threatened even a greater catastrophe. There was a high wind—otherwise the fire might have been confined to the roof of the dwelling where it was first observed, having caught around the chimney. Sowersby had stripped his place of good timber, but he had left the saplings and brush to grow rankly. This under-growth marched in line with his barnyard fence, and covered the entire upper reaches of the hill, to the very ridge of the eminence. It likewise spread clear to the boundary fence between this farm and the Heron Nest.

The wind drove the sparks and blazing embers far out upon the scrub, and soon there were brisk fires burning in a dozen different spots. It was Billy, from his seat in Short's wagon as they drove up, who saw and realized the significance of this fact.

"Jack! Jack!" he shouted. "Look out for the woods. The brush is on fire. It will sweep our place and the whole mountain will be afire before you know it!"

Most of Sowersby's possessions were already heaped at one side on the ground, out of danger of the fire. Jack Herron, spurred by his brother's advice, gathered a large part of the men and boys and with brooms, shovels, branches of trees, and even old horse-blankets and gunny-sacks, they dashed into the brush and tried to beat out the fires as fast as they caught.

But, as the flames waxed fiercer at the farmhouse and barns, the embers scattered more broadly. While the fire fighters were beating out one blaze in the brush, half a dozen others were started. At last a sheet of darting, crackling flame rolled up the hillside, licking up the small stuff, and lingering long enough upon the saplings and young trees to scorch their bark and wither their leaves and branches. The heat from this steadily increasing river of flame was too great for a human being to endure; the fighters were driven back and the fire spread northward, and in the direction of the fence between the two farms.

The brush grew close to the fence on either side; and when the fire got into the Herrons' thicker woods it would be beyond all control! Unfortunately, there was no open space where a plow could be run. And even a wide furrow would not have stayed the fire as long as the wind drove it so fiercely.

In the natural order of things—as long as the wind did not change—the fire would pass through the timber above the Heron Nest, and by hard work the bungalow and the Herrons' out-buildings, might be saved. Seeing that it would be a fight to assure the safety of their own home, Jack and Billy leaped into Mr. Short's wagon with Miss Van Coe, and 'Lias drove them over to the Heron Nest in a hurry.

As the pony galloped along the uneven wood road to the Herrons' gate Louise suddenly seized Billy's arm.

"Look, Billy—look!" she gasped. "Who is that?"

The young fellow's gaze followed the direction of her outstretched arm. The fire was as yet a long way from the boundary fence, but the cloud of smoke was being swept far ahead of the fire. And into this smoke, near the fence, and running up the mountainside, Billy saw a figure that—in another moment—disappeared!

"Oh! was it a man?" cried Louise.

"I don't know who it could be," returned Billy; "but it certainly was a man. And if he is trying to get over the mountain before the fire catches him, he has his work cut out for him!"

"Who could it be?" demanded Jack, anxiously. "Father——"

But Mr. Herron was at the gate to open it for them when they drove in. The other members of the family were in evidence, too, when the wagon arrived in the dooryard. The immediate surroundings of the bungalow was open. There was a broad patch of grass, and part of the garden, between the house and the woods. The barn and chicken houses were not so well situated, and by Billy's advice they began to saturate these buildings with water from the barn cistern and from the feed-pipe that brought water from the spring to the chicken runs.

"We can concentrate on the bungalow if the fire threatens it; but these other buildings will be in danger first," declared Billy.

As the others set to work Pearl Mary drew Billy aside, and whispered:

"Harry is here! I saw him and spoke to him not half an hour ago."

"He's here?" cried her brother. "Where? Let me set the lazy dog to work! For once in his life, he may be of some use."

"I don't know where he is now," she replied, in the same low tone. "I found him sleeping in the woodshed, in his old place. He had been drinking and was scarcely himself. He seemed better dressed than ever before, Billy; but he was all mud, and he wasn't even shaven. Oh! he was an awful sight," and she shuddered.

"What did he say to you?" asked Billy.

"He really didn't say much of anything," replied Pearl Mary, with a sigh. "He only mumbled when I spoke to him, and he was afraid of me, I believe. Or else he was too drunk still to know who I saw. I—I was rash, Billy. I tried at once to make him tell what he—he knows about me," and the girl's tears overflowed.

"Rash indeed, dear," said Billy, shaking his head. "You must let me do that. Where do you suppose he is now?"

"He ran away from me. He went up toward the spring. I thought he was going to sober up, as he used to, and would return; but he has not come down——"

Billy's brain was suddenly smitten with the remembrance of the man he had seen disappearing in the smoke of the under-brush fire! Had that been Harry? Was the tramp foolish enough to venture into the line of the approaching fire? Perhaps he was still too much intoxicated to realize what he was about. He might have fallen in a drunken stupor somewhere up there in the woods, while every minute the flames were roaring nearer to him!

Some of the men and boys from the village had arrived to help the Herrons. The Sowersbys' premises were doomed, but the Heron Nest could be saved, and Jack and Billy had plenty of assistance. The latter drew his brother out of the crowd and repeated to him what Pearl Mary had said.

"The fellow will be burned alive up there!" gasped Jack.
"We must find him."

"Whoever goes after him will run the risk he runs," objected Billy.

"I'm going," declared the big fellow. "Don't you realize what it means to Pearl Mary? If that scoundrel is lost, she'll never learn the truth about herself. I'm going, Billy! I'm going!"

"But not alone, old man," returned his brother, quietly.

He gave a few instructions to 'Lias Short, and then followed Jack up the hillside. He shouted to him, and caught Jack by the spring. Billy had a sheet that he was stripping up as he hurried on.

"Wait!" he commanded. "Wait till I wet these cloths. We'll be glad to wrap them about our heads and faces. My goodness, Jack! but there's a big volume of smoke up here."

"It's rolling close to the ground. I believe we shall have rain," declared Jack. "Hurry! If we are going to find that poor wretch——"

A loud "ping!" interrupted him—a ringing note that rose higher than the roar and crackling of the marching flames. It sounded like a single note struck on the base wire of a great harp.

"What's that?" cried Jack.

"The fire has reached our fence," explained Billy, as they started deeper into the woods, still mounting upward. "The heat has snapped a wire. Ah! there goes another. The fire is over our line in one place, at least, Jack."

"And we're going to risk our lives for that drunken scamp," growled his brother. Then he choked and they went on in silence, for the smoke made conversation difficult.

Billy began to pant and his leg dragged a little; but he managed to keep in sight of his brother. The smoke grew more dense, and occasionally, through the aisles of the wood, they saw a yellow flame flash upward and then climb, like a nimble sailor, into some doomed treetop! Their best timber seemed sure to be destroyed, and at another time the thought would have troubled the brothers greatly. Now there was, perhaps, a human life at stake—and Pearl Mary's future happiness in peril, too!

Gradually they approached the line fence. As they mounted higher it was plain that the fire was not advanced into their own land, farther up the mountain. Jack occasionally sent a shout of "Hello! Harry!" echoing through the woods. "If the fellow isn't too drunk to understand what this fire means, he'll surely come toward us—not run away from us," said the big fellow.

But Billy had his doubts. They went on for fully ten minutes, and saw nothing but the rabbits, and a frightened fox, running from the fire. Then suddenly a wall of flame sprang up at their left. A thicket, through which the line fence ran, was blazing fiercely. Again one of the strands of heavy wire snapped, its resonant voice ringing through the wood.

"There!" yelled Jack, seizing his brother's shoulder. "There's the fellow now!"

Just beyond the patch of flame a human figure staggered out of the thicket. They saw him stand waveringly, his arm over his eyes to shield them from the scorching heat. Perhaps he was already blinded by the flames!

"Harry! Harry! This way!" shouted Jack.

For a moment, they saw his face. He dropped his arms and glared about him like a creature at bay. The smoke billowed about his figure, silhouetted against the background of yellow flame. Then suddenly he turned—turned to run from them, Billy realized, and he sprang forward himself with a cry, hoping to halt the fellow.

"Ping!"

Another strand of the fence wire broke. They saw it writhing in the air and—in an instant, like the hand of Fate itself—it seized upon the running man and brought him to the ground in the very path of the advancing fire!

The brothers dashed on to the writhing man. They waded through burning brush, with the flames knee high. They seized upon him. The coiling wire had lassoed him, and his struggles had served only to entangle him the tighter, while the leaping flames seared him until his clothing smoked!

Those few seconds were like a vision of Purgatory to Jack and Billy Herron; but they freed the body at last, Jack shouldered

it, and, followed by his brother, leaped away to higher ground, where the fire had not yet come. Somehow they fought their way back through the smoke to the spring. There Billy could go no farther, and dropped beside the covered pool. Jack dashed bucketsful of water over them both; but the unconscious Harry lay so still where the big fellow had placed him that they thought him already dead.

Jack hurried for assistance. The men brought a door, upon which they lifted the injured man, whom, meanwhile, Billy had found to be breathing. But he was far gone, and the eye of a layman only was needed to discover that Harry, the tramp, had come to the end of his rope! He had sucked the heat and flames into his lungs; his body was scorched, his face a mass of scars and burns. He begged them, when they reached the bungalow, to let him lie on the porch and not to remove his tortured body to a bed inside.

One of the neighbors took Short's wagon and started for Dr. Olson; but they all realized that the injured man would not live until the doctor came. And Harry knew this fact better than anyone.

"Well, I got mine, didn't I?" he whispered to Billy. "I never could stand prosperity," and by the writhing of his features Billy knew that the fellow was trying to display his old, leering grin.

It suddenly began to rain—a downpour that promised to save the Herrons' outbuildings, and perhaps to quench the forest fire itself. Harry still feebly begged them not to carry him into any shelter.

"I been rained on many a time before. I ain't neither sugar nor salt," he mumbled. "I—I guess I'll get a whole lot worse than rain where I'm going—heh?"

"God help you!" cried Billy, under his breath. "Don't go out of life so hopelessly—so wickedly. Maybe you haven't had a chance, Harry. But you've got a last chance *now*. Ask forgiveness and help of the One who only can aid a man in your situation."

"Heh? You're—good feller," mumbled the tramp. "Yes!

I'd like to square things. But I got sumpin' ter do first. Can't—can't ask—forgiveness—— Say! where's that gal?"

Pearl Mary and Jack stood nearby. The big fellow drew the girl forward, into the range of the dying man's vision.

"Do you mean Pearl Mary?" asked Billy, softly.

"That's her!" gasped the man, his breath labored now. "I'll tell you. - Your old man—won't probably—remember ag'in. I give her to him—yep! She's me brother's kid. Brother died. Her mother died, too, and I couldn't—couldn't find her mother's folks. I—I wasn't fit to bring up no gal baby." Again that writhing of the tortured face that Billy knew for a grin! "So, I struck your house. The old man and his wife—was good-natured. They was stuck—on havin'—the baby. I—I didn't tell 'em much, but jest—jest sneaked."

There sounded a ghastly sort of a chuckle in his throat. His body relaxed upon the rude couch. He breathed for some time, but he did not speak again. When they finally lifted him and bore him into the house he was far, far beyond the power of caring what they did with that poor, scorched body that they had only known as "Harry."

When they performed the last kind offices that could be done for this wreck of manhood, Billy discovered that the tramp was dressed in new underwear and linen, and that his outer clothing had been of good material, too. He suspected that it was Harry, after all, whom he had passed on the street several weeks before. They found nearly a hundred dollars in his pockets; his observation that he "couldn't stand prosperity" was then explained. Where he had obtained these funds and good clothes the Herrons could not imagine.

And the poor wretch's death cast a deeper shadow over the lives of the young people. Pearl Mary accepted the whispered words of Harry, on his deathbed, as final. She knew at last what manner of people she sprang from. Although her parents may have been harmless folk, her uncle was evidently a man of low origin and the same blood that ran in his veins ran in hers! They could not move her from that stand, nor would she listen to Jack Herron's pleading.

"If there was good reason for my refusing to marry you before, Jack," she said, quietly, "when I was not *sure* what my parentage was, consider how much less fit I know myself to be now! I know what that man was. There may be other relatives living who are even worse than he. I will not listen to you. Harry was my uncle; my father may have been a worse man than *he*; who was my poor mother? There may be no redeeming features upon either side of my family. Let me alone, Jack! I hate myself now; and I should utterly scorn myself and be miserable for the rest of my life if I allowed you to give me your good name, and saddle the family with the burden of a girl who is worse than a nobody!"

Foolish? Of course! But who was to change Pearl Mary's mind when once it was made up? The boys knew her disposition of old, and gentle and sweet as she ordinarily was, did she once set her mind and heart on a thing, she was as unyielding as granite. She believed she owed it to the family that had sheltered her, and kept her from the charity home, or from the streets, to refuse Jack's pleading. Naught they could say would change her decision.

Even Veronica Calvert, before she went home for the Winter, tried to span the gulf Pearl Mary had set between herself and Jack. If Jack had not been her own cousin, and if she had not learned to love Pearl Mary so much, Veronica would certainly have "set her cap" for the big fellow! But she was as unsuccessful as Billy had been as mediator; and she went home in tears and told her mother and father all about it.

It was a somewhat gloomy Winter, therefore, at the Heron Nest. And yet, their harvests had been most abundant, everything about the farm was successful, and the outlook for the next year was most inspiring. The venture of Billy and Louise Van Coe in the culture of pansies, pinks and roses was eminently satisfactory, too. And this partnership between the banker's daughter and Billy Herron, not only Jack, but the rest of the family, realized was destined to be a deeper and more lasting compact than one inspired by mere business interests.

CHAPTER XXIV.

YES.

That tricksy sprite, Spring, breathed softly on the face of sleeping Nature, and the earth awoke again to renewed life. The strong sod before the wide open door of the bungalow at Heron Nest had been transformed into a beautiful carpet of tender green velvet—it seemed almost in a night! Out of the south the soft wind came and the blades of grass nodded a welcome; the birds came, too, and Pearl Mary stood in the doorway and listened to a songbird that seemed to be trying to split his throat for very joy over the coming season!

Before the girl lay the easily sloping field, plowed and harrowed against the time of planting Jack's main crop—the no longer scorned onion. Beyond stood the long line of posts and wires, on which, later in the year, Billy's especial variety of tomato would be fastened. There was a man already spading compost into the ground there, in readiness for the plants which Billy was hardening off in his own beds down on the Van Coe place.

In the opposite direction swept the other fields that, by industry and hard work, the Herrons had cleared, and were cultivating into gardens and meadows, the like of which were to be found nowhere else in Medway. Other farmers who had grown tired of tilling the soil properly, or were careless, or who had never really known how to get the best there was *in* the earth *out* of it—many of these came to the Heron Nest to learn the secret of the boys' success.

So Pearl Mary was only mildly curious when she saw a runabout turn in at their lower gate from Sowersby's lane, and approach the house. She waited for the carriage to come near, and not until it stopped before the door did she recognize Uncle Calvert.

She welcomed him cheerfully as he slowly climbed down

from the wagon. His treatment of her during the past few months had been so uniformly kind that she had put away her own old dislike for the man, and her hand had a warm clasp for his when he came upon the porch.

"If you are looking for Billy, Mr. Calvert," she said, cheerfully, "he is down to Van Coe's."

"I saw Billy working there as I passed," was the old man's reply, dropping into one of the rustic seats.

"Then it's Jack you want? He's over helping the Sowersbys build their new house."

"I don't want Jack," responded Mr. Calvert with something of his old brushfulness of tone.

"Then——?"

"I came to see *you*," declared the man, and looked at her with narrowing eyes.

"To see me?" repeated Pearl Mary, seating herself, likewise. "What is it, sir? Is it Veronica?"

"I'm happy to say Vinnie is better than ever she was before in her life. I can thank *you* for that, too, I reckon," he said.

Pearl Mary did not understand him. She remained silent and watched his creased, fat face which seemed now to be overclouded with trouble.

"I came out here particularly to see you, Mary," he said, at last. "I got something to tell you. Will you listen?"

"Of course, I'll listen to you, sir," she returned, but in wonder.

"I—I— You've heard me speak of my sister, Rose?" blurted out the man, rubbing his hands nervously up and down over his huge knees. "You've known about her?"

"I know that you had a half-sister, Rose, that you thought a great deal of, and that she is dead."

He looked at her thoughtfully for a minute in silence. Then he said, perhaps unwittingly speaking aloud:

"I loved her. I loved her from the minute she came into the world. I hated my step-father, but I loved her. And mother left Rose in my care when she died."

He said it simply, without much emotion; yet Pearl Mary

found that the tears had suddenly welled into her own eyes as she listened to him.

"I've had to hustle all my life," said Mr. Calvert, still in that reflective, impersonal tone. "What I've got, I come by hard. I married Mrs. Herron's sister because I wanted a home, and wanted a lady at the table. That ain't sayin' I ain't fond of my wife; I'm fonder of her now than I was when we married. And, of course, there's Veronica, too. . . . But I loved Rose."

"She—she wouldn't always be guided by me, though. She married a man I didn't like. He was a musician, and his folks came from Europe, and the whole family were musicians, or actors, and were kind of Bohemian. Mebbe they were all right. Some of them had made a noise in the world. But they weren't *our* kind."

"Then," said Mr. Calvert, shaking his head, "it hurt me that Rose should think so little about leaving *me* when she was married. She went away with her husband. She went right out of my life and never seemed to care to come back."

"Then she died; he died, too; there was a child, and I went to see it soon after it was born. It was the only time I ever was in their house, or saw any of his folks. I liked 'em less than I thought I should. Maybe, if the child had been a boy, I'd have done something for it when Rose and her husband died. But I left it for *his* folks to take care of."

He was silent a moment. From a quietly impersonal attitude as she listened to his story, Pearl Mary had suddenly sprung to eager attention. Color glowed in her cheeks, her hands interlocked, and she leaned forward, breathlessly.

"Years ago," pursued Mr. Calvert, "I took a dislike to you. Do you know why? No! you couldn't guess. It was because you reminded me so much of Rose. Jim and Mary had you, and you wasn't even rightly theirs—yet you looked like Rose. I—I guess I was jealous of them for having a daughter like you."

"Well, anyway, that's past and gone. I got over that mean feeling about you. I got ashamed of myself. Do you know when? Why, 'twas when you came into my office that day Veronica acted so like a fool, and made me tell you that you

wasn't really Jim Herron's daughter. And afterward, when you were so kind to Veronica—well, I'd have to be a pretty hard proposition if I didn't begin to feel a good deal different.

"Hem! That's neither here nor there. . . . It was along last Summer a man come to see me. I couldn't make out what he wanted at first. Then he told me who he was. He was the brother of the man Rose married.

"He was no good. I guess he was about as low-down and bad as ever a man who came of decent folk could be. And the story he told me was mean and bad, too. He said when Rose and his brother died that the little child had been left on his hands. He didn't want her. He couldn't reach any of the well-to-do members of her father's family just then. This fellow, I reckon, lived by his wits and off of the other members of the family all his days!

"So he tried to find me. It wasn't so easy, for he didn't know my name. You see, Rose bore her father's name when she was married. *My* father was John Calvert.

"Anyhow, he brought the little child to the place I lived in; but he found it difficult to identify me. And he chanced upon some people who were charitable—who were kind—who had enough of God-Almighty-love in their hearts to take my poor little Rose's daughter in!"

The old man's face was suddenly convulsed and he bowed his head in his hands. When he again spoke it was with a voice so broken, and so tender, that nobody would have recognized brisk, overbearing Uncle Calvert.

"Girl! girl! don't you see? *You* was Rose's daughter—and I never knew it! I've girded at Jim and his wife for years because they saved you from the almshouse. I fair hated you because you stirred in my heart memories I wanted to forget. I told these boys—my nephews—that they were fools to be burdened by such as you!

"And all the time they were caring—were sheltering—*my own flesh and blood!*

"That's what I've come to tell you, child. . . . I paid that fellow money at first to keep away, and to keep his mouth shut.

I didn't know what to do. It seems that Jim Herron had dropped something that made Harry Glendenning learn who you were for sure; and he had seen me and remembered me from the time long ago when I visited his brother and Rose. He bled me. I couldn't make up my mind what to do.

"Just you think," said Uncle Calvert, pitifully, "what this means to me! I had treated you so badly. I had scoffed at Jim Herron for ever taking you into his house.

"But since Veronica came home from here last Winter and said how you and my nephew, Jack, loved each other, but that you wouldn't marry him because you was related to that miserable wretch who died here, I ain't had scarce a moment's peace. I wanted to tell you long ago. But it was hard—mighty hard."

Uncle Calvert stood up before her. The tears had left their wake upon his old face. He stretched forth both hands, hesitatingly.

"Niece Mary!" he said, still brokenly, "I'm here to ask your forgiveness. And I'm here to tell you, too, that there isn't any reason why you should think yourself less than any Herron who ever lived! You're a Calvert. Leastways, your grandmother was married into the family, and she come of good stock herself. And so did your grandfather, too, for that matter—though I never liked him. Your own father's folks ain't like ours; they're a deal smarter, I suppose, and have made more noise in the world. You needn't take that poor wretch who made all this trouble as a fair sample of the Glendennings.

"And, anyhow, you're my sister Rose's child! That ought to be good enough for Jack Herron. If it ain't——"

Suddenly she stopped him. Her arms were swiftly wound about his neck, and her fresh young lips ended his speech.

"Dear Uncle Calvert!" she cried, her eyes raining tears, but her voice thrilling with happiness. "If I live to be an old, old woman, I can never be made so happy again as you have made me now."

'And then she was gone in a flash, and he saw her running across lots to the gate in the fence between their own place and Sowersby's. She was composed when she came in sight of the

new house. Jack had charge of the work, and he and the other neighbors were giving their services as cheaply as possible to help the unfortunate Sowersbys out. The latter had had no insurance when their buildings burned, and, in spite of all their miserliness and dishonesty in the past, the family had never seemed to prosper!

But that the Sowersbys appreciated the spirit which had brought Jack Herron here to help them in their need, was shown by the alacrity with which Bub, the red-headed one, ran for Jack when Pearl Mary asked to see him.

"Yer sister's come for ye, Mr. Herron," said Bub, and then stood and gawped after the two in dawning admiration as Pearl Mary and Jack walked slowly away.

Jack saw the wonderful light in her face when he joined her. "What has happened?" he asked, amazed by the change.

"Something too good to be true, Jackie-boy," she returned, in that old playful way that had been so long missing in her treatment of him.

"But you have been crying," said Jack, doubtfully.

"Sometimes we cry for joy," she retorted.

Her blue eyes sought his black ones and their gaze did not falter as he stopped in the path and tried to fathom her behavior. His own face changed as he looked down at her. There could be but one thing—just the greatest thing in all the world—that could have happened to make her look at him like that! And yet Jack doubted.

"Tell me! tell me!" he panted. "Do—do you love me still, Pearl Mary?"

"Haven't I always loved you?" she murmured, her trembling lips still as smile.

"But—but— Dear! can I have you?" he cried, and opened wide his arms.

She looked straight into his eyes still. She did not waver or hesitate. She was the boldest of the bold in that moment of supreme happiness.

"Try me!" she challenged—and then she was in his arms! With the story told they wandered home, hand in hand,

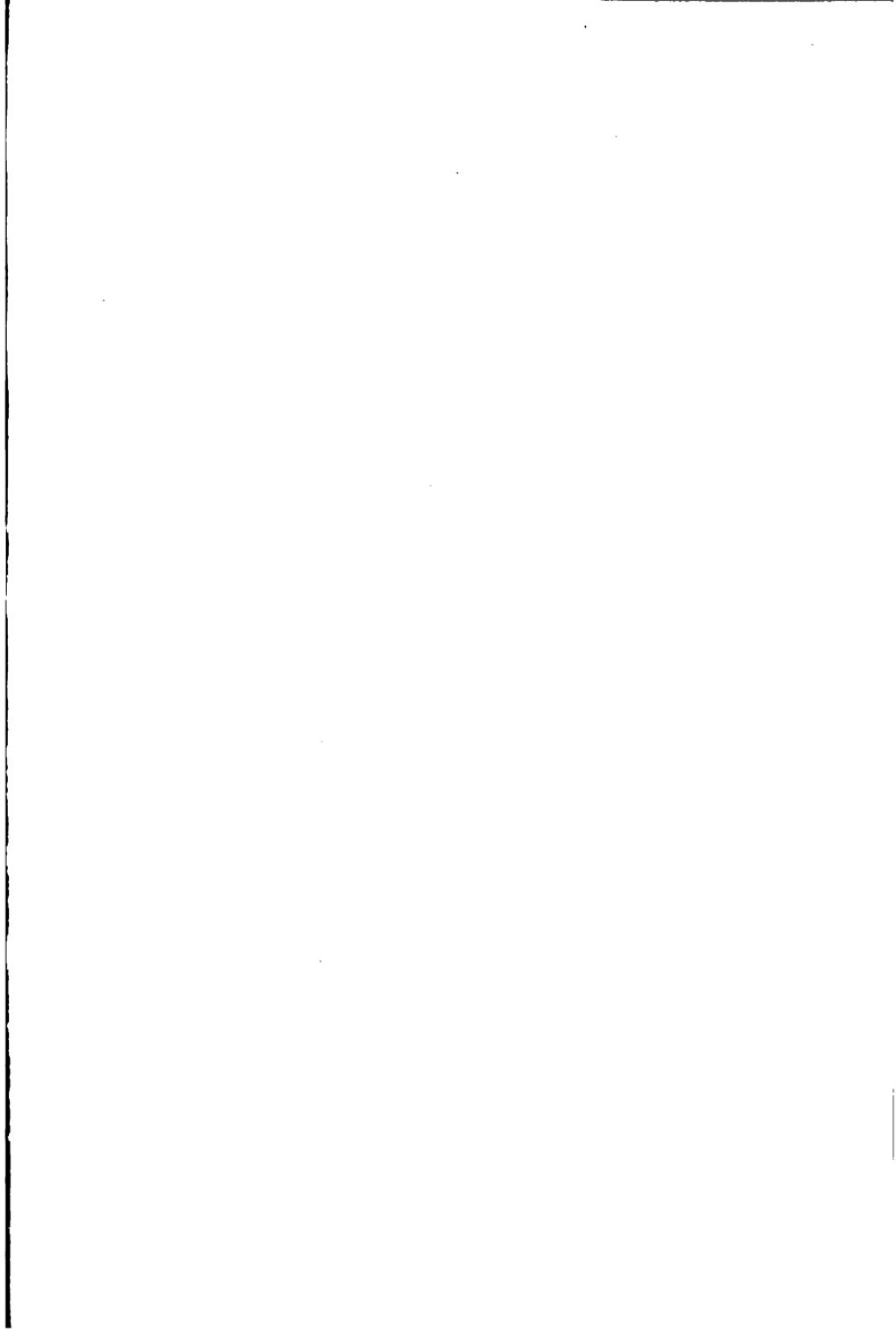
through the warm Spring sunshine. They saw the family gathered upon the wide south porch of the bungalow—Granny calmly rocking in her chair; Aunt Nannie still busy with pretty silks, but not because there was need of it now; Mr. Herron, gray-headed, but upright, talking with Uncle Calvert, whose pudgy figure bulked big in the armchair he had selected.

Up the path which had been worn smooth between the bungalow and the Van Coe place, Billy was climbing briskly, and beside him walked Louise Van Coe, her hand resting lightly on his arm with a certain air of proprietorship that could not be mistaken. No longer did Billy's limb drag as he walked; one could scarcely descry the limp in his gait.

And so, the two pair of young folk came nearer. Dear old Granny saw them coming, and her smile of welcome drew the attention of the others on the porch to the approaching four. Billy and Louise, Jack and Pearl Mary, met before the broad doorstep; the light in their faces told the old folk, better than any poor words of mine, the story of their love.

THE END.

James E. Martin.









OCT 6 - 1954

